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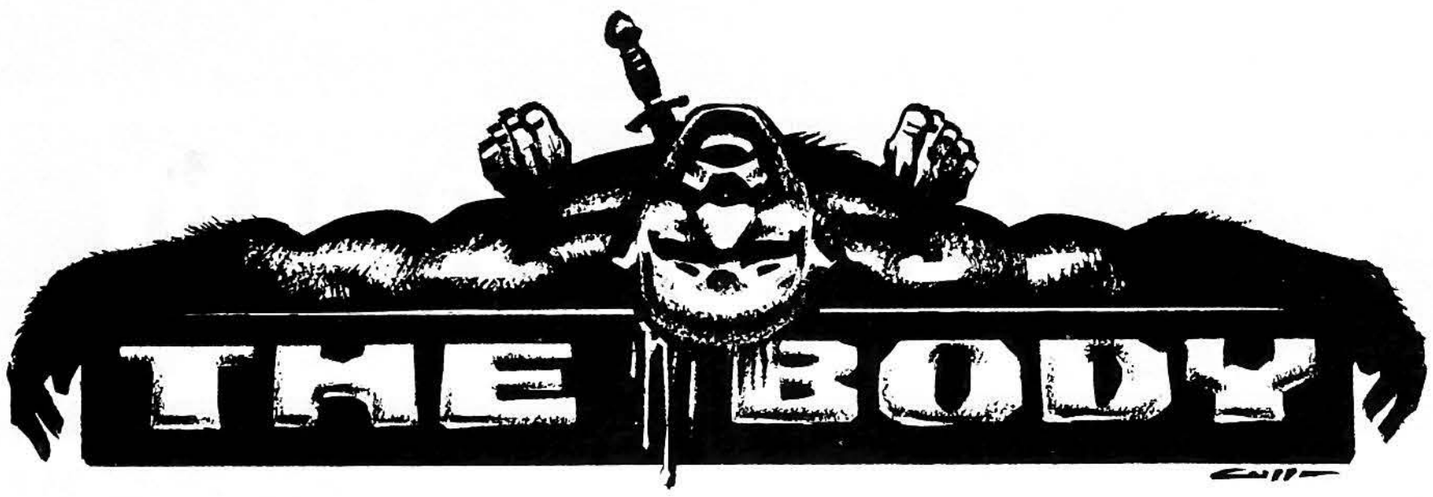

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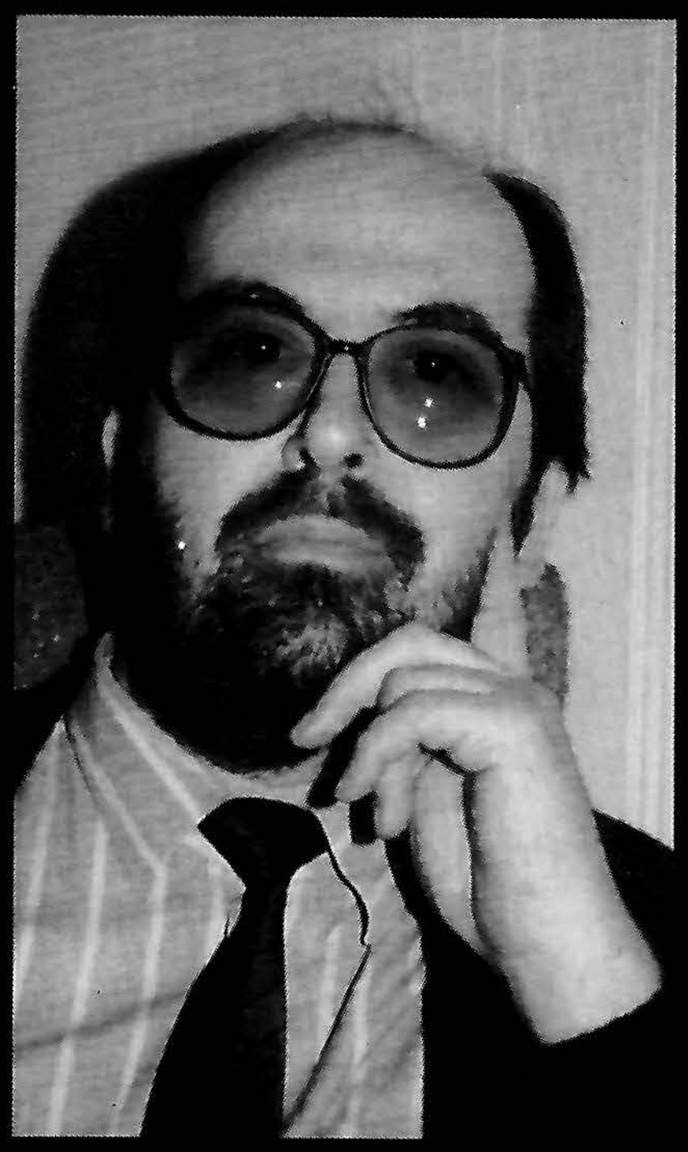


Editors. Doncha love 'em? Well actually, all too often, the answer is probably 'No'. But perhaps that's because nobody really knows what they do, explains Dave Reeder.

DEADITORIAL

If writers are cursed by the sight of the blank white page in front of them, then they should try being an editor for the day. Apart from the pages that are the responsibility of the advertising folk, the editor has to fill dozens of pages and make them interesting. As well as doing it again next month and the month after.

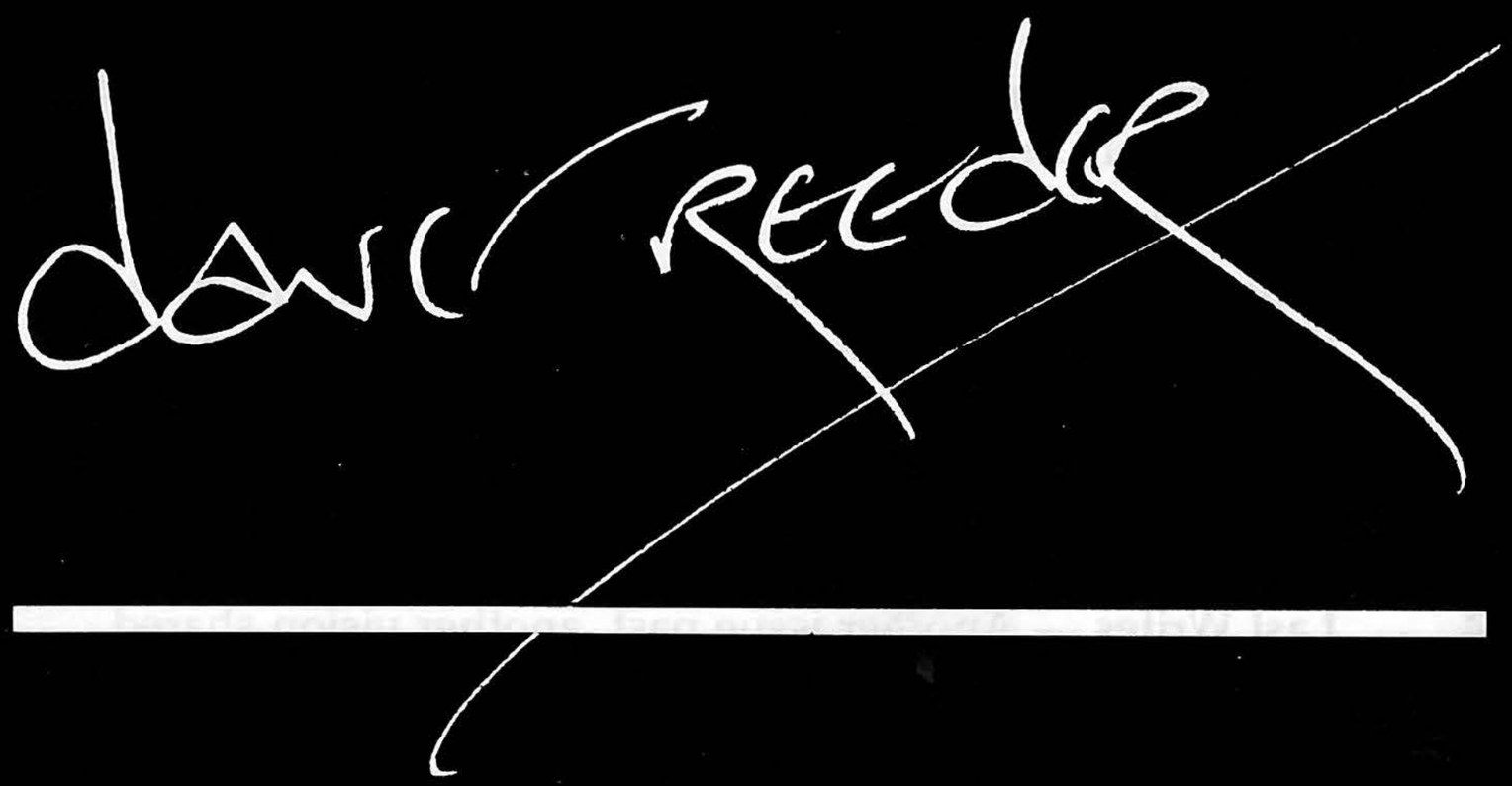
I'm thinking about this because, a week after I write these words, I'm due to appear on a panel at this year's Fantasycon, organised by good friends in the British Fantasy Society. The subject? 'Why be an editor?'

A good question. But I suspect it's a muddled question, because I'm not at all sure that most of us ever made the conscious choice. We reached such dizzying heights by a variety of means — we were either a writer tired of rejection slips or we were driven by a vision. And yes, before you ask, I've been both.

We do it, I'm sure, because we have to do it, because we're in love with the package — the combination of style and content that makes up (in my case) a magazine. And that's impossible to explain to anyone who hasn't done it — after all, just think of the completely different feel to a magazine with the same content that a new editor brings. So I can't explain it but it's all to do with that thrilling feeling that says 'I made the right package; I got Banks and Gaiman and Vince and all the others together. Without me, they were just separate creators; with me, they were a team that inspired readers.'

That's as true, of course, of anthology editors. Again, their vision makes the difference. And so too do the unknown editors who work for publishers to help an author to create the best book the author's capable of. They're the real stars in this business.

Back to magazines which, believe me, are just about the best fun there is. You should try it some time. The next fifty odd pages show how I do it — how would you have filled them?



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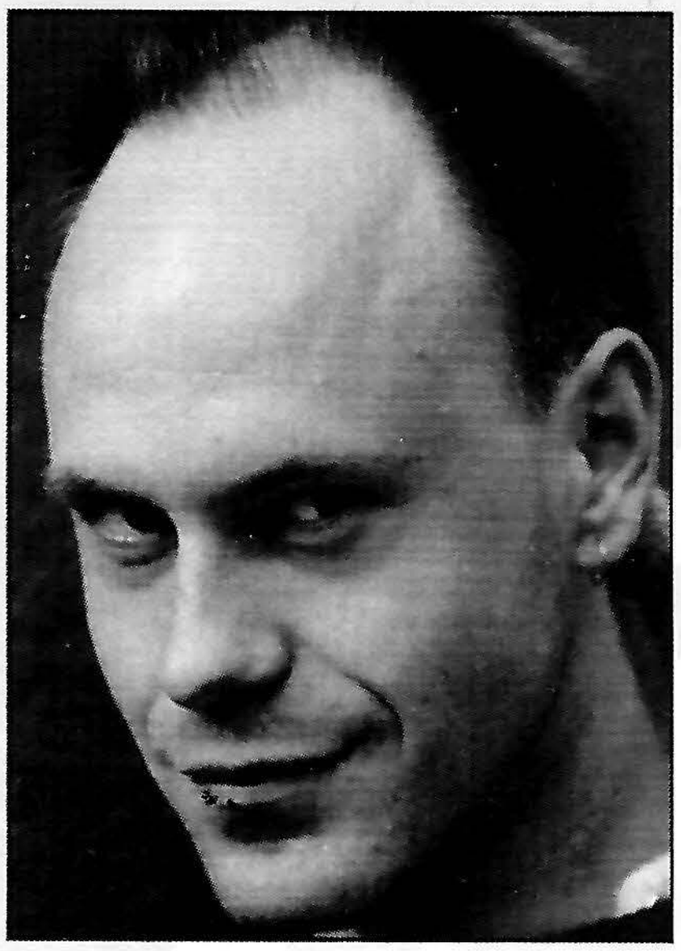

The Killing Note

Our New York-based columnist, Phil Nutman, casts a jaundiced eye over a world in which style and violence are inexorably linked.

It's no secret that when *ROBOCOP* creators Ed Neumeier and Michael Miner sat down to pen the first draft of their high concept, near-future, law enforcement script, they turned to comic books for inspiration. Take one part *DEATHLOK: THE DEMOLISHERS* one part *JUDGE DREDD* and mix together with a dose of *DIRTY HARRY* and — hey, presto! — *ROBOCOP*. So who better to write the screenplay for the sequel than Frank Miller, one of the most vital, literate, cinematic and smart writer/artists in the business?

But being a comic book auteur wasn't the only qualification producer Jon Davison was looking for in a potential writer: it was a definitive feel of the material, an instinct for the stuff that heroes are made of. Here, too, Miller scored highly.

The man who dug *DAREDEVIL* from his early '80s grave of mediocrity, elevating Marvel's blind "Man Without Fear" to new heights of psychological realism, Miller's talent as a storyteller grew by leaps and bounds. Immediately following his *DAREDEVIL* stint came *RONIN*; the tale of a dishonoured 13th century samurai reincarnated in corrupt, hi-tech 21st century New York. A complex, multi-layered narrative probing the questions of Karmic debt and the nature of sacrifice, it only scratched the surface of the artist's abilities. *ELEKTRA: ASSASSIN*, his next major work, probed the nature of heroism, psychosis and obsession, and confounded critics and comic book cognicenti alike (was Bill Sienkiewicz's expressionistic/schizoid illustration fine art or comic book art?) But for Miller this all appears to have been a dress rehearsal for his magnum opus, *BATMAN: THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS* — his sharp-as-a-scalpel, black-as-night dissection of the Caped Crusader's psyche and the very natured of costumed heroism itself which, alongside *WATCHMEN*, redefined the nature of comic books, flipping them up into the realm of "graphic novels" and gave the medium the recognition it had so long deserved.

Who better, indeed, to chart *ROBOCOP*'s odyssey into the future of law enforcement than Frank Miller? There really was no competition.

Two months after the movie opened in America, Frank was finally able to sit down and talk about his adventures in the screen trade, albeit by phone from his home in Los Angeles, where he's just finished writing the first draft of *ROBOCOP 3*. Despite the interval between post-production and the movie's appearance, he confessed to still being too close to the project to be objective concerning its strengths and weaknesses. "I honestly can't say if I'm happy about it or not," he says after a moment's pause, giving a short sigh.

"Unlike comics, movie making is so collaborative, and a writer has so little control over his film. I believe I was given much more influence over the film than a writer is usually, but it was a shock to me coming from a medium where I have almost total autonomy to work in a field where the particular wishes and whims of dozens of people took precedence. It was a matter of trying to hold something together against the overwhelming influence of chaos."

Moving from one creative medium to another is often an unsettling transition for even the most seasoned creator. As anyone who is familiar with Miller's work knows, his storytelling is tremedously cine-literate to begin with, so it's surprising to hear him admit this. Comic books are, after all, sequential art, narrative form composed of still frames, and are very close to the movies. For Miller, however, it was not so much a question of imagery building to a dramatic sequence but a question of emotion.

"There's a transformation that takes place on set when the writers word is trans-

lated into reality that's quite startling. I learned, for instance, the intimate nature of film: there's nothing more powerful in a movie than a close-up of an actor putting forth strong emotion. Of course, we all know this when we watch a movie, but it's another thing to be there and see it take place, especially when it's something you've written. It's an electric feeling you can't have in a comic. The use of sound is another element and, in particular, the moment by moment nature of it. Unlike a book, you can't flip backwards, can't pause unless the movie tells you to. And the result of that, especially in an action-oriented movie like this, was an effort on my part to make the story much more linear."

Movies are often rewritten to the stage where new drafts or polishes are penned right up to the start of principal photography and sometimes during shooting as well (*THE TWO JAKES* being a recent case in point). *ROBOCOP 2* did require a lot of rewriting, but, instead of hire someone else, Miller was on hand during the shoot to do the necessary work. So what didn't work?

"The main problem was the basic intent of the piece," he explains. "The script had undergone many, many changes by the time we arrived in Houston. I felt it was immensely confused, it didn't know what kind of movie it wanted to be. (Director) Irving Kershner and I worked very, very intensely to work out the focus, and it was a struggle to define what the story was about. But the script we ended up with was much more on target than what we started with."

Part of the problem was the dramatic imbalance between the villains, specifically what had happened to Dr. Faxx (Belinda Bauer), who was Miller's favourite character.

He sighs at the memory, revealing a touch of the frustration he felt as one of the cornerstones of his cast had been worn dow n by the restrictive rewrites. "Dr. Faxx had been conceived in my first draft as something different to what we had when we went on location. Over a number of drafts she'd been reduced from what I felt was a novel character to little more than a cliche. But on set things started to click. We kept Belinda for an extra week and worked her hard and I came up with a number of scenes to reconstitute the character. That was probably the most gratifying part of the process for me, seeing Faxx come back to life. In the first draft she was the main villain."

If Frank Miller cannot be objective about the movie as a whole, here he displays unbridled enthusiasm. "I'm happiest when Faxx is on screen. And the various comedic bits. The part where the board members sit around discussing what kind of mind RoboCop should have, and we see that played out to its logical result. There are other things, like his entrance with the flaming car wreck. I think it's a terrific entrance. But generally it's the interplay between Faxx and RoboCop that excites me the most."

The reason for this is the theme of free will. For Miller, the dilemma that stimulates him most in storytelling is the question of free will and, as satirical as the character of Faxx is, he feels she was a perfect opportunity for him to poke fun at very insidious forms of censorship. "There is a great deal of mind control which is coming from the liberal rather than conservative camp. It's very easy to do the usual corporate villains, died in the wool Reaganites. It's a very easy target; it happens to be a very accurate target but it's been done to death. I have a basic reflex action that when I see a sacred cow I shoot. Having had a few run-ins with censors, discovering most of them to declare themselves Liberal, I found a whole new area for satire, a vein that hasn't been tapped."

There is no doubt, in the overall scheme of *ROBOCOP 2*, that Dr. Faxx poses a far greater threat to our metalec hero; but does Miller, therefore, see Cain as a lesser villain? "Perhaps," he says, pausing to chose his words carefully. "I think we did go to Texas with a confusion about the part. In a way he comes across as a far more traditional villain than he could have been." Again he pauses, adding, "but this is really difficult for me to gauge." With the initial drafts of the script focusing on Dr. Faxx, Cain's character was more in the victim mode than it is in the final movie. "He was an out and out raving psychotic," Miller assesses, "used as a tool and then planted into the robot so it had a violent reaction to everything. Basically, he was a much simpler character."

Another aspect of the rewrite process the artist found enjoyable was the way in which Cain metamorphosized into a New Age guru, complete with crystals, pop psychology, and the skeleton of Elvis! The New Age motif was conceived during a late night discussion between Miller and production designer Peter Jameson. By morning the Presley skeleton was ready and Cain became not only the leader of the Nuke cult but custodian of The King's bones.

"Elvis is an American icon, right up there with Mother Theresa and Oliver North," he notes, "and part of the New Age manner is to lump everything that's made an impression into one big pot of stew." Having lived in California for a number of years, this is something he's seen first hand and, with Miller's penchant for taking pot shots at revered subjects, it was perhaps inevitable that he'd take the chance to make a few digs at that particular Californian eccentricity.

"Elvis is an American icon, right up there with Mother Theresa and Oliver North," he notes, "and part of the New Age manner is to lump everything that's made an impression into one big pot of stew."

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Although his trip to Texas proved to be gruelling at times, Miller notes with happiness there were a few days of intense excitement which fortified his strained nerves. "Two days in particular spring to mind," he says, his voice rising from a slow delivery to a more speedier one as enthusiasm kicks in. "Both involved a great deal of activity early in the mornings and both entailed phone calls urging me to the set as Kershner's request. One involved a disagreement with Peter Weller, who was keeping the crew waiting while he argued over some dialogue. It turned out to be one of those occasions when I was able, in five minutes, to rewrite several lines of dialogue that made the scene much better. Weller and I had several arm wrestles during the course of shooting, but both of us came out of the experiences with better material, so it was a question of artistic considerations rather than a personality clash.

"But the real anecdote which comes to mind is the morning Rob Bottin delivered the Robo torso. The scene had been written and rewritten and everyone was pretty happy with it, but when the prosthetic arrived on set, it was so good that instead of having a prop hanging in the scene we had another character. So I took twenty minutes and completely rewrote the scene and it turned out far better than we originally thought. That sort of thing was wonderful, it was just like my old days in community theatre. Sometimes, seeing a performer giving it all they've got at certain moments gives you a vital flash of inspiration. It's great. There's a terrific immediacy when you write something there and then, handing it to the poor actor on the spot, seeing the footage in dailies the next day," he pauses. "It's quite shocking to see the vitality that's injected into certain scenes."

Producer David Brown (*THE STING, JAWS* et al) has said of the script writing process: "A script is an imperfect reflection of the film," which implies the finished product is perfect. Well, no film is perfect (except maybe *CITIZEN KANE*, Scorsese's *MEAN STREETS* and a handful of others), and *ROBOCOP 2* is a far from perfect picture. For all its strengths — and there are many — it's certainly one of the better sequels made in recent years. The film's main defecit is the subplot concerning RoboCop's dealings with his wife. Coming after the ultra-violent, freewheeling opening rush of murder and mayhem, the scenes in which Murphy returns to the station house only to be confronted by the women he loves indicated there was going to be degree of emotional depth to the narrative not previously hinted at. Then, all of a sudden, Murphy confronts her, informing the distraught woman it's all been a mistake — and chop! the plot line suddenly disappeared. Miller explains what happened.

"It was the biggest error made in the final cutting," he admits. "That was originally a plot line that lasted through all three acts of the movie and instead it became truncated into two back-to-back scenes that do carry a certain strong gut level punch, but creates a false expectation and, perhaps, undermines the strength of the last moment of the movie. RoboCop's decision to let her go, to in fact lie to her as to what he is, is the noblest thing he does in the entire movie. In the original structure, his face-to-face encounter with her was late in the movie and was followed by a key scene where he goes to Alex Murphy's grave and says goodbye. But this got cut for time reasons and, although I was heavily involved in the editing process, it was a serious structural error," he concedes.

Another area of the story which seemed uneven is the sequence in which the OCP board members decide to have the cyborg reprogrammed, adding to his prime directives and turning him into a mechanical boy scout sans balls. Considering the dark Machiavellian stamp of the tale, this sequence, which appears midway through the story, seems at odds with the rest of the material. Surprisingly, this was no mistake.

"It was in fact the first concept I played with. Since he has a reprogrammable mind, the question was what if in the first movie the corporation had given him these prime directives which were all dead on correct to create a perfect cop and, since much of the substance of *ROBOCOP* is parody of corporate tomfoolery, I thought what would any large corporation do if they had a programmable superhero on their hands? I figured they'd do what movie people and comic book people do all the time, which is listen to every specialist group there is and put out something that's completely incoherent. And that's what I tried to capture in those scenes. I never felt it was at the expense of the character, I thought it really underscored his nature and him risking what life he had in order to gain free

will — well that again was one of the first things I came up with and felt strongest about in the story. It was a risky move, I know," he concurs, "in having him act as a buffoon, but I am happy with the results of those scenes as I think there's a logic to them and his overcoming it mitigates the humiliation factor."

If Murphy/RoboCop has said farewell to his past, effectively denying his humanity (despite the sly robo-humour displayed in his closing line, "but then we are only human"), where does the character go from here? Miller seems to be the obvious person to answer the question as he's just completed a draft of *ROBOCOP 3*, but instead of giving a hint he prefers to remain tight lipped on the subject. "Yes, I have completed a draft of the script, but no, I can't discuss it because I'm now longer involved with the project. I think the first draft's fun and technically I am associated with it, but since this is Hollywood and nothing's written in stone until it's out there on the screen, it's not a wise area of conversation right now."

Beyond *ROBOCOP*, Miller has written his first original screenplay, which is currently being considered by a number of companies, but again he remains tight lipped. What he is most happy to talk about, however, is his long overdue return to the comic book medium. In fact, in many respects, 1990 could be called The Year of Miller. Aside from his screen debut, both as writer and actor (Frank plays the bespectacled drug boffin responsible for the manufacture of Nuke who gets blown up), he has no less than three prestigious graphic novels appearing between now and Christmas.

First up is *GIVE ME LIBERTY*, another near future saga dealing with the dark undercurrents of Truth, Justice and the American Way. This time it's a collaboration with British artist Dave Gibbons and marks his first major work since *WATCHMEN*. A sort of *PILGRIM'S PROGRESS* for the Millenium, it recounts the adventures of Martha Washington, a 16 year old Afro-American as she searches for understanding and dignity in the face of poverty, corruption and war. Available in four 48 page installments from Dark Horse Comics, it's a must-read work Frank is justifiably proud of.

"It's been a very exciting book to work on. Dave and I came roaring off the successes of *WATCHMEN* and *DARK LIGHT* and I came up with a story that ran to hundreds of pages which would appear as a series of weighty graphic novels, oh so serious and so political. Then, after a while, we ran out of steam and had to re-evaluate what we were doing. I've never had a project grind to such a halt before, and it actually died for a couple of hours. Then it suddenly turned around on itself in a dramatic fashion the like of which I never imagined. What we were missing was joy, the joy of comics, the joy of the medium."

Fortunately, Miller and Gibbons came to their senses and instead of bowing to what Miller refers to as "almost Stalinist pressure in the field for top creators to produce works which were essentially political tracts", they decided to follow their hearts into an adventure story with elements of political parody; one which has garnered a great deal of critical praise.

"It's great to fall in love with a character again," he enthuses, refering to Martha, "and the other great thing is working with a small publisher who allowed us to do what we want."

Also from Dark Horse is *HARD BOILED*, which he described as a parody of action-adventure genre in movies and comics. "It's the first time I've done a series where the emphasis is so clearly on comedy. Again, originally it was a much more serious story, but when the art started coming in and I saw what amazing, absurdist material Geoff Darrow was doing, I realised my true role in the story was as the straight man. The series is really a study in understatement in terms of words, overstatement in terms of aretwork." A simple story told with a lavish flourish, *HARD BOILED* is also highly recommended.

And finally, there's the long awaited *ELEKTRA* graphic novel, due out at Christmas, sadly the specifics of which will have to remain under wraps until nearer its publication date.

"I'm tremendously happy with the way it's turned out," Miller concludes, "and the last couple of years have been great."

With so much critical applause and public success under his belt, the future for Frank Miller promises to be so bright he might just have to wear shades.

"What he is most happy to talk about, however, is his long overdue return to the comic book medium. In fact, in many respects, 1990 could be called The Year of Miller."

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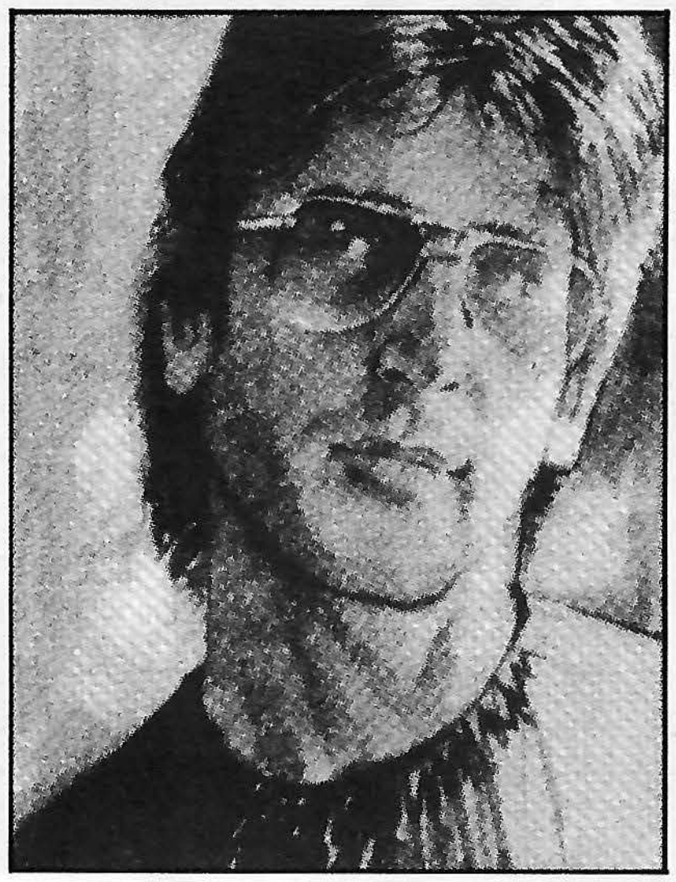
SEPT 90

THE LUGGAGE IN THE CRYPT



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You *can* take it with you. Well, so the Ancient Egyptians believed. 'It' of course was everything. Clothes, food, jewellery, furniture and if you were a member of the royal family: thrones, chariots, slaves. It was assumed that you needed in death, what you needed in life. What then did you choose? Which food, which favourite chariot etc? What items mean so much to you in this world, you'd just have to have them in the next? Nicholas Vince poses the questions to Neil Gaiman.

NV: Neil, what is your view of the afterlife?

NG: I don't think it's very Egyptian. I don't know. I definitely believe that this isn't all that you get. I suppose you would probably have to define it as re-incarnation, but it doesn't follow all those strange New Age rules and so on and so forth. I think it would be interesting to find out. In a perfect Neil Gaiman universe there would be wouldn't be **one** Afterlife, there would be a million of them. With the Egyptian as one of the options that you get. I particularly like the idea of becoming a ghost. I'd love to be a ghost — I'd be a dead good ghost.

NV: You've even got the t-shirts for it, all ready.

NG: Exactly.

NV: OK, so if you have multi choices — how would you move between them? Is that what you mean by re-incarnation?

NG: What I hate about everything — including the process of writing fiction — is that after a while you have to make choices and start limiting things off. I did this interview the other day, for the BOOKS OF MAGIC (to be published by DC). The interviewer's last question was: "Do you believe in magic." I believe in an infinite shading of grey with magic at one end and not at the other. I'm quite happy to believe all these things which are mutually contradictory. If that makes any sense.

NV: That makes sense to me.

NG: It's only because it [the Afterlife] isn't important to me, it doesn't actually enter my life one way or the other, or change how I behave in any way. So I'm perfectly at liberty to believe all these things at the same time — I like believing things. On a gut level I don't believe I'll never die. This is probably sheer ego, but I don't actually have any plans to die and I think it would be a very bad idea. I can imagine people going: "Hup, Neil's dead — we can all go home."

NV: Don't we all, deep down, gut level, believe that?

NG: No, Nick, I know you're going to die.

NV: Oh. Fine.

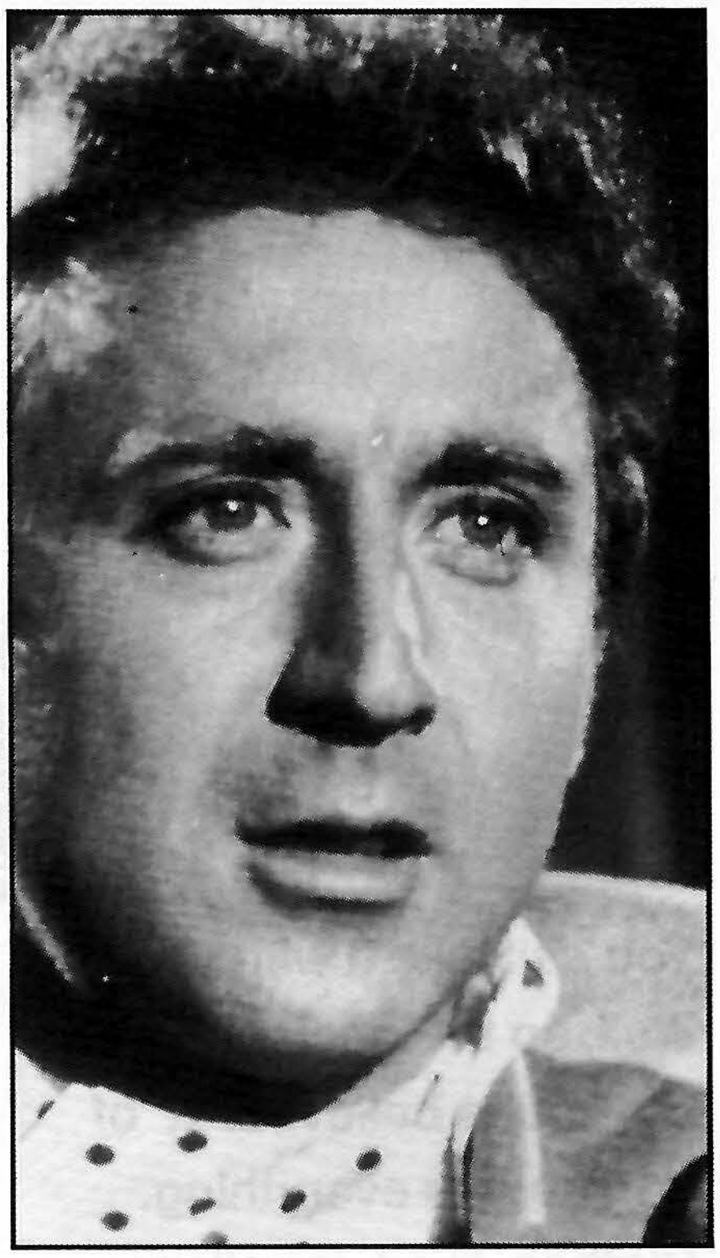
NG: And I know those people upstairs are going to die and are fated to it. I remember Steve Gallagher came out with the phrase: "I may beat the system." Which is where the story in *SANDMAN* 13 (also collected in SANDMAN: *The Doll's House*, published by DC) came from to some extent. It was me sitting there thinking — well, what if you had someone who just said: "Bugger it, I'm not going to die." And didn't. Woody Allen said: "I don't want to achieve immortality through my works, I want to achieve it through not dying." I think that's my favourite Afterlife: not dying at all.

NV: Assuming then, you **are** about to be carted off to the Crypt and the van has arrived, what's it going to be carrying. Let's start with books.

NG: It would be carrying a lot of books. I think it was Richard Burton who said: "Home is where the books are." And that's true. I know that I'm Home, when I'm surrounded by toppling, badly stacked, out of order, piles of books. So books would be vital. At which point we hit the Desert Island Discs syndrome: "Neil, you're only allowed a few books." I thought about ways to cheat on that and I've decided . . . firstly, am I allowed to take a Biography?

NV: Yes, of course.

NG: Then I want to take THE BIOGRAPHY OF MANUEL, by James Branch Cabell, which is somewhere between twenty and twenty-four books. Including such well known books as: JURGEN, FIGURES OF EARTH, THE SILVER STALLION, THE HIGH PLACE and totally unknown books with titles like THE RIVET IN GRANDFATHER'S NECK, THE LINE OF LOVE, GALLANTRY, CHIVALRY, THE JEWEL MERCHANTS. I would take that 'Biography', partly because I like the idea of cheating and partly because James Branch Cabell is one



"On a gut level I don't believe I'll ever die. This is probably sheer ego, but I don't actually have any plans to die and I think it would be a very bad idea"

of my heroes. A man who was a fine writer, a fine and slightly detached commentator on pretty much everything. But particularly human foibles and the mechanics of how we make our way in the world and what we think about the world. He was also somebody who I have a lot of respect for because he was perfectly willing to take any way of telling a story, to tell the story. If the story needed to be a Fantasy novel, it would be a Fantasy novel. If it needed to be a, quote unquote, Mainstream novel, it would be Mainstream. If it needed to be a Historical novel . . . And he also invented some wonderful forms that I've never seen anyone else use. There's a book of short stories, GALLANTRY, which is a delight, because it's not a book of short stories at all, but you only realise that when you get quite near the end and suddenly realise that . . . essentially the villain of the last story is the hero of the next one. And gradually it all moves round in this huge circle and you get to the party at the end with everyone there and you realise that there aren't any heroes and villains, because everyone is by definition the hero of their own story.

And were you to be strict and say I couldn't cart off with me the twenty-one green volumes of the Storisende edition, were I allowed to take only one Cabell, I haven't a clue which one I would take. Probably, FIGURES OF EARTH and, failing that, JURGEN. I don't know. **That** would be a toughy. I have too many favourites, for different reasons.

Moving on, I'd take THE MAN WHO WAS THURSDAY. (By G.K. Chesterton. Penguin Twentieth Century Classics) If there is only one chunk of Chesterton, that would be it. Because the whole theme of it is that the Police are Criminals, and the Spy Masters are Spy Catchers and he follows it through to its ultimate conclusion that God is The Devil and The Devil is God. It's just: Same people, different hats. And it's one huge game and it's a lot of fun. And that's the way I tend to look at things. And it's a pretty rich story and it's also a nightmare.

NV: OK, so you've now taken something like twenty-three books. Any more?

NG: Yes, BREWER'S DICTIONARY OF PHRASE AND FABLE. Preferably one of the out of date editions. I use my reprint Victorian edition. I use my current Brewer for accuracy, but I use my old one for all the weird little stories. I think Ebeneezer Cobham Brewer was absolutely out of his tree, but entertainingly and brilliantly out of his tree.

Now, on your desert island you get THE BIBLE and THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE. Do we get those in our tomb?

NV: If I said I'd allow you one or the other, which would you take?

NG: I love Old Testament prose. That wonderful, sonorous prose in the King James Bible. There are some marvellous, disgusting little stories in there, total nightmares of blood and sex and lunacy. Which I'm very, very fond of. The few I adapted for OUTRAGEOUS TALES FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT (Knockabout Press) weren't even the tip of the iceberg, just this little snowflake glinting on the top of the iceberg. But I'm also terribly fond of Shakespeare . . .

NV: You've definitely got to choose just one.

NG: Let me take the Old Testament then, because it's nastier and there's more fantasy in it.

NV: That's definitely all your books.

NG: I did warn you. You're going to ask me which item of furniture and all I could think of was a bookcase. I don't actually care very much about anything else.

NV: Films or videos?

NG: One of them would be THE PRODUCERS (1968 directed by Mel Brooks). I saw that film when I was fourteen at school at a 'do'. Once or twice a year, they'd show a film in the main auditoria and I fell off my chair. And it somehow imprinted itself on to my consciousness. Oddly enough, I think this may be genetic because my son, who is just seven, came up to me the other day and said: "Turn, turn, kick, kick, turn. Turn, turn, kick, kick, turn." I said, "What?"

He said: "You know Daddy, it's what that man in a dress says." "What?" He said: "You, know Daddy. Bielli, Stocken Bloom! Bielli, Stocken, Bloom! When you got it baby, flaunt it!" I thought: Fine it's genetic. This tendency for lines from THE PRODUCERS to get stuck, is entwined with your DNA. "You're going to jump on me, you're going to jump on me like Nero jumped on Pompeia" etc, etc. And it's an inspired performance by Zero Mostel. And it's a wonderful performance by Gene Wilder, probably the 'best' performance by Gene Wilder. And it's the only Mel Brooks movie that doesn't lose it, he doesn't lose control. Most Mel Brooks movies have had wonderful bits in them, but that one just works from the very first moment to the very last. And you care about these two terrible little people.

NV: A second film?

NG: ALL THAT JAZZ (1983, Directed and Choreographed by Bob Fosse). It's just one of my favourite films. Probably my *favourite* film in a lot of ways. Despite . . . I was going to say 'despite its flaws', but 'because of its flaws' would almost be a better way of saying it. It's about mortality, it's about the creation of Art, it's about Death, it's about relationships with people, it's being a shit. It's about sex. It's about over working . . . I really don't know why I like it.

NV: Possibly for the lady who, when reviewing the film within the film, produces a smaller balloon — marked a (half) — than the ones above her head — marked 1, 2, 3. Just to show how much she hated it.

NG: Also, what is strange about that film is: that there's a level on which it is not true. I find a fascinating discontinuity, when you get to the end of it, because ALL THAT JAZZ is an autobiographical film, in which he has an heart attack at the end and dies. Because he's overworked, he's taking speed, he's messed up his life completely. In reality Bob Fosse had his heart attack, had his open heart surgery, mended his ways and lived another five years and made the movie.

I may well be an old softy — I probably am an old softy — and I keep watching that movie with people who tend to regard it as very bleak "Well, he dies in the end," and so on and so forth. But no he doesn't, because he made the movie.

I also think the 'Everything Old is New Again' mime dance number by his girlfriend is one of the great moments of cinema. And I can watch it, I can't watch films in the same way that I can read books, I can't watch the same film over and over. And that's a film that i **can** watch. Maybe because it is too long and he did try and cram too much into it.

NV: That's number two, you got a third?

NG: You want one?

NV: If you've got one.

NG: WIZARD OF OZ (1939 Directed by Victor Fleming), which I don't remember liking hugely when I saw it as a kid. When I was a kid my favourite movies were MARY POPPINS . . . Actually life as a kid was a desperate battle to avoid being taken to see THE SOUND OF MUSIC. I think I got taken to see it five times in all, between the ages of six and eight. Elderly relatives, school parties, you name it — I was forever being taken to THE SOUND OF MUSIC (I even got out of seeing it a few times), which was a terrible experience. How could anyone inflict that on a child? There must be something in the Geneva Convention . . . Anyway, somebody took me to see THE WIZARD OF OZ and I don't remember being hugely moved by it or getting the same sense of magic that I got from something like MARY POPPINS: 'You'll believe a sweep can come out of your chimney.'

So when Holly my daughter was two, I bought Mary . . . I'd mistakenly got the idea that Mary, my wife, liked THE WIZARD OF OZ. I don't know where I got this idea from because she didn't. So I bought her the video for her birthday or Christmas. You know that wonderful sensation where someone opens the wrapping and looks at the present and you think: "That was a really stupid thing to do." And they're looking: "Is this a mistake, did you get this for me?"

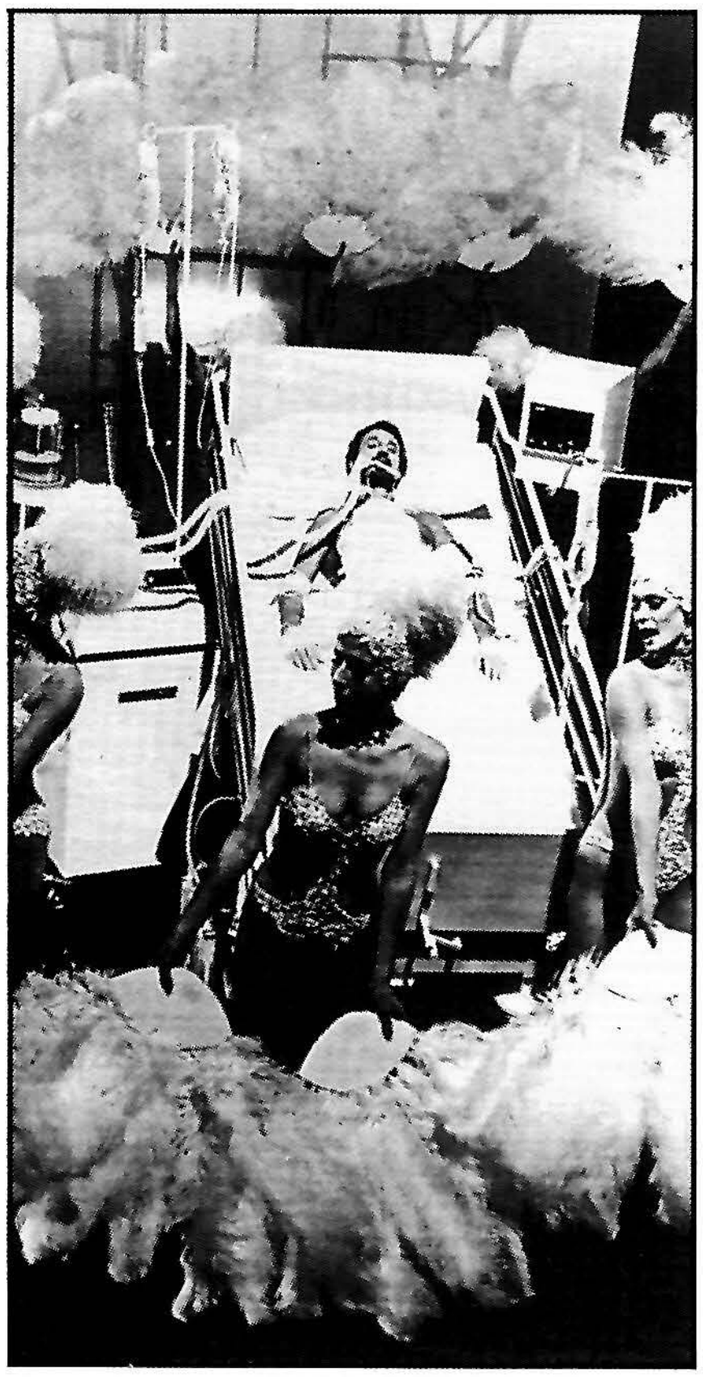
Anyway, so there was this copy of THE WIZARD OF OZ lying around the house and Holly hated TV. And one night I was baby-sitting for her and I shoved it on. And since then I think we've now gone through five copies of it on video. They've been Holly's . . . and I've discovered it's a wonderful film — it's a magnificent film. It's beautifully sustained, beautifully put together, wonderfully cast, wonderfully acted, great songs. I think as a kid I hated 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow', because it was too slushy. I could have cut that. You know there's this whole thing people tell you — "Do you know the Warner Brother executives saw the movie and they wanted to *cut* 'Somewhere Over the Rainbow'." I always think what terribly sensible men, I would have nuked it.

NV: Lets move on to music.

NG: OK: one of them would have to be THE COLLECTOR'S SONDHEIM, the three CD set. Stephen Sondheim is someone for whom I have infinite respect. He's not only a terrific song writer, but he's a man who can make words sit up and beg. He's a man who is the sort of the Barbara Woodhouse of words. They do whatever he wants them to do. And I think that's wonderful. There's a level on which somebody of that amount of skill and talent leaves you awestruck. Well, he does me.

I want an Elvis Costello album and rather than take a Costello collection of which there are a lot, I'd like to take an album. Probably the very first one: MY AIM IS TRUE. Which is not to say that he hasn't done better since then. It's the sheer energy and it was my favourite record from those old punk days.

And the last record is can I have: 'Anything by Lou Reed' as a choice? Or even 'Anything by Lou Reed, except . . . ' There are a couple of records I'd put a line



"I love Old Testament prose. That wonderful, sonorous prose in the King James Bible. There are some marvellous, disgusting little stories in there, total nightmares of blood and sex and lunacy. Which I'm very, very fond of."

through.

NV: No, you have to choose one.

NG: I can't let the moving men do it for me as they take them downstairs. Right now it would be SONGS FOR DRELLA, the recent one. Actually no, it wouldn't, if I had to be one album it would be the third Velvet Underground Album, which is called THE VELVET UNDERGROUND. Because it's all about sex and dying and love. And caring and loneliness and it's a lovely album.

NV: What about your favourite food?

NG: I get very bored of one kind of food, very quickly. If, in my crypt I'd get food regularly and it could be one thing, it would be Rasa Sayang's (Restaurant in Frith Street, London) CHICKEN SATAY. There is something about it that the Gods themselves . . . When they get it right — sometimes they burn the chicken a little and sometimes they skimp on the peanut sauce.

The 'Gaiman Theory of Eating Chicken Satay at the Rasa Sayang' is basically, that I know one day that Pete Atkins and Dave McKean will actually go in there and we will explain to the waiter that what we want him to do is bring us Chicken Satay. And when he notices that any of the Chicken Satay, or any of the bowls of peanut sauce, are empty — he is to go away and replace them. At some point during the evening, we will either physically prevent him from bringing us any more. Or we will go down on our knees and beg him not to, at which point he is to stop and bring us the bill. After giving us some time to recover. I **like** Rasa Sayang's Chicken Satay. The favourite drink by the way, is a Scotch and American with ice.

"It's about mortality, it's about the creation of Art, it's about Death, it's about relationships with people, it's about being a shit. It's about sex. It's about over working . . . I really don't know why I like it."

NV: The comics.

NG: This is interesting because comics are for me somewhere between books and records. I know that I'd take books that I'd be willing to read and re-read and be stuck with for a long time. Records I'd like to take because they bring back memories. With comics I'm sort of torn between the ones that come with the memories attached and the ones which would bear re-reading. I think that at the end of the day I'm a selfish bugger and I'd probably take the ones that would bear re-reading.

I'd take the complete CEREBUS. At least the complete Cerebus up to the point where I snuff it. In a perfect world and if there is a God, if I do snuff it I will still get the complete CEREBUS through to issue 300. What Dave Sim is doing there is just brilliant, the guy is a genius.

NV: That's number one.

NG: I'd take the ED THE HAPPY CLOWN BOOK. Bears re-reading. And currently the comic which is most exciting me is FROM HELL (Published in parts in TABOO by Spider Baby Graphics) by Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell. I don't actually plan to die before they finish that; I'd like one thing to be complete before I snuff it.

NV: Art, paintings, statues, bric-a-brac?

NG: My statue of Groucho Marx. Which is about a foot high and I bought with the first real money I ever made from comics. It was when the BLACK ORCHID royalties came through and, for the first time pretty much in my life, I suddenly had . . . I was in the black, and I had some money and I thought I can just go out and buy this thing. So I did. I bought myself Groucho and he sits up on my book shelf and he looks down at me, and it's very hard to take yourself too seriously. I mean, it's the occupational hazard of writers. Everything else: the broken marriages, the ruinous addiction, the living in penury, the lower back pain — all these you feed back into your work. Take yourself too seriously and you're lost. You'll wind up teaching creative writing somewhere. So, Groucho helps me on that. When I take myself too seriously and I look up and there's this tacky Groucho Marx statue staring down at me holding his cigar. So, he'd go.

There's a really nice diamond in the Louvre. It's the biggest diamond in the Louvre, I'd like that, it's really pretty. I stood at it for two or three hours. I don't actually like diamonds, I don't like jewelry, precious stones and things, but I liked that.

And I'd take something by Dave McKean. I'd probably take the cover to the SANDMAN: DOLL'S HOUSE COLLECTION.

NV: I'm sure that's easily arranged. Two or three plays or musicals you'd like performed by a celestial repertory company.

NG: Well, can I direct?

NV: Yes, and cast whoever you like.

NG: It's not casting I care about; well, yes I care about the casting but I'm not someone who has 'dream casts' . . . 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to get Lawrence Olivier to play Bottom and Nick Vince to play Ariel." I'm not the kind of person who gets that kind of urge. But, what I do have is an urge with very few things, where

I know the text and I've seen it on stage and I've seen good ones, but none of them are how I saw it when I read it and directed it in my head. One of them is A MIDSUMMER'S NIGHT DREAM (Shakespeare) — I've seen some good ones. But I didn't satisfy that urge, which I thought I would do, when I did all that stuff in SANDMAN 19. I thought that would get it all out of my system. Lo and behold it didn't.

NV: A second?

NG: RUDDIGORE by Gilbert and Sullivan. I'd like to direct that and get it right. I've seen quite a few RUDDIGORES and they play it tongue in cheek, they play it camp — the worst was the Keith Michell TV one. It was to ram two fingers down the throat. It was not fun at all. It's a gothic melodrama and it's got ghosts in it and it's got ancestors who come back to life and it's got a cruel Baron under a curse who has fled — it's got all this wonderful stuff and people don;t do it right. I should like to do it right. You should do it like a horror film up on stage. You do it straight. The lines are funny so they'll be funny, but you play it quite straight.

SWEENEY TODD by Stephen Sondheim. I liked the Christopher Bond play but I loved the Sondheim, if you cut a few of the slushy mushy numbers.

NV: You can't. I like the slushy numbers. Oh alright, which ones would you cut.

NG: I would cut bits of Green Finch and Linnet Bird and I'd cut little bits of the first round of Johanna. You need it there for the second round to work.

NV: It's a very short song. It's only three verses.

NG: The second round is one that I love. He takes this love song and turns it into this nightmarish gaping wound. And you realise his daughter, that he doesn't know, has become just a symbol.

NV: Agreed, but the first round, if done well should be this very sexy, horny number.

NG: I wouldn't argue, but when I'm listening to it on CD, they're the ones that my finger goes out and I skip to the next track. I'm sorry. I'd like to do a very intimate performance of SWEENEY, where you drag the audience in. And I don't think that the Hal Prince was bad, I just think it could be done differently.

NV: What costume would you like to be buried in?

NG: Black shoe. Black socks. Black underpants. Black jeans. Black leather jacket and a black t-shirt. It's at this point we run into trouble: which black t-shirt? I am the Imelda Marcos of the black t-shirt. People give them to me and I buy them. Yesterday, Dave McKean gave me two. So, whichever black t-shirt is the love of the moment. I think that's what I'd like to be buried in. It's what I'd feel comfortable in. I don't know if you've ever seen me in a suit and tie.

NV: No.

NG: I look uncomfortable. I don't feel comfortable. I don't relax. These are my clothes, this is what I wear; it's great. I don't have to worry about colour co-ordination, it goes with everything. It makes life so much easier. The fact that I wear nothing but black socks means that I'm very unlikely to go around in odd socks. Or at least I may well be, but no-one will know.

NV: You mentioned your Groucho statue. Is there anything else small you'd need, an object of personal value.

NG: Shades. Sunglasses. I'd take a pair of sunglasses. Objects of personal value, bric-a-brac? Can I take the three of four boxes of books which I've been bought and haven't read yet?

NV: No, Neil. I allowed you the twenty volumes of the BIOGRAPHY OF MANUEL, but this is definitely cheating. No way Neil.

NG: OK, just trying it on. What else would I take? Photographs? No, I don't like them, they're always so frozen. Can I take something to write with?

NV: There's no reason why you shouldn't. I can imagine that the walls of the crypt would be completely bare when you started, you'd get off your slab and start scratching the wall with something if we didn't supply with paper and pen. In fact you'd probably go through the paper and start on the walls anyway.

NG: Yes, I'd like to keep writing. You'd could tell some really interesting stories if you were dead.

NV: Particularly if you were a ghost and had been wandering around watching people. Now, for an apologia. If I said, you were in front of a Celestial Court who said: "Neil, you have to leave behind all your books if you don't answer this question . . ."

NG: I tell you, my response to practically anything said to me by a Celestial Court (Osiris and all these people with feathers and weighing my heart in the balance and all that kind of thing) is very much: "Alright guv, you've got me banged to rights, I'll go quietly." I was talking about this to Dave McKean and Pete Atkins last night. All three of us are terribly successful, we're doing exactly what we want to do. And we're all certain every night before we go to sleep, on one level, that when we wake up tomorrow morning, it will all be taken away from us. I'm

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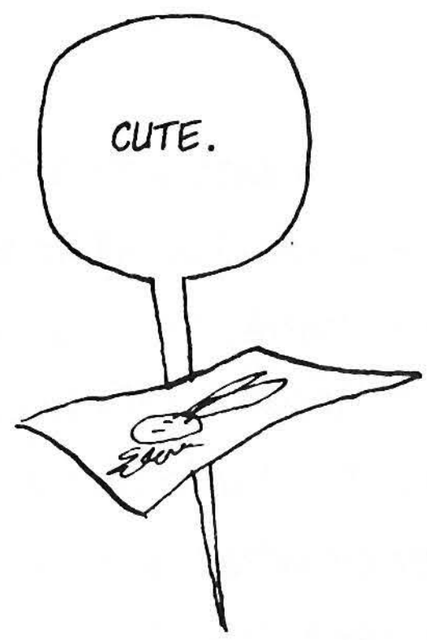
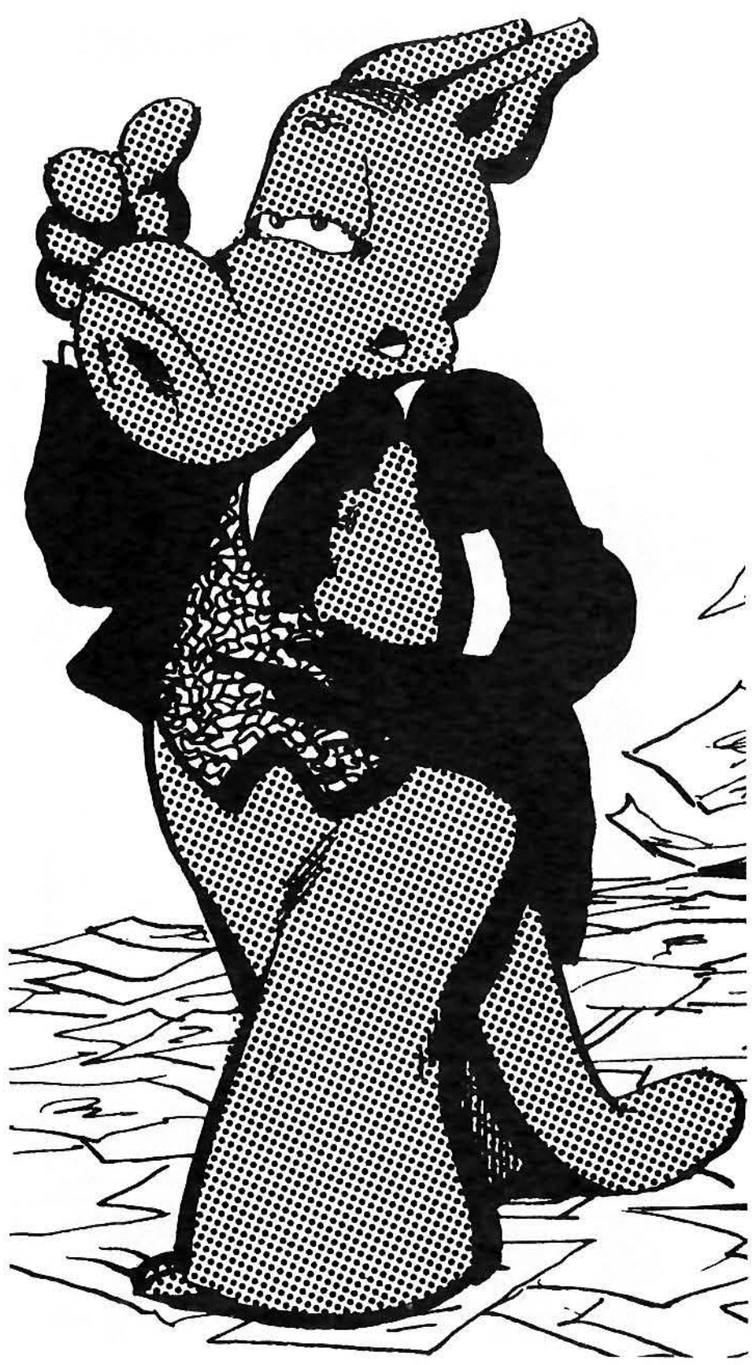




working in a medium I love, with access to any medium I want to work in at this point. Were I to really want to do something, all I have to do is invest the time and energy in it. I spend more time fending off calls and making polite apologies. I'm telling stories and it's wonderful for me that people like them. I get wonderful feedback and meet some wonderful people who are fans of mine, or at least fans of my writing or my characters, whatever. And I know lots and lots of really nice people and that's important.

The guy in my local framing shop, can't understand it because I'm forever in with pieces of artwork that people have given me. Another one arrived this morning. Rick Veitch sent me one of his SWAMP THING covers and it's beautiful. And on that basis I tend to feel that were somebody to come along and say it's all over, we've caught up with you, you've got to go and get a proper job, then I would go and get a proper job. In the same way, if I hauled before the Celestial Court, I would hang my head, plead good intentions and set off on the road to Hell.

NV: Is there one thing, you could look back in your life and say: "I could have done better."

NG: Everything. This is one reason I collaborate. I collaborate so much I can get at least some kind of enjoyment out of what I've done, because there's something else there, that somebody else has done that I like.

Last night I read the new TALES FROM THE FORBIDDEN PLANT. I was reading through it and I got to the short story that I wrote and it's a five year old short story, and apart from proof reading it six months ago, I haven't read it since I wrote in 1986. I read it, I got to the end and I thought: 'I've got no idea whether this is any good or not'. All I did when I'm reading it through is think: 'Oh that sentence clunks.' I got to the end and I got no pleasure from it. I can pick up an issue of SANDMAN and get a huge kick out of it, because someone has drawn it. I can pick up GOOD OMENS. I think it's a wonderful book, because it's not all my work. Even sentences I wrote aren't totally mine anymore because Terry may have added a word.

"So pretty much everything that I've done, I tend to look at and think: I could have done that better. Or maybe I couldn't have done that better or whatever. I don't as a general rule look at old stuff too much."

So pretty everything that I've done, I tend to look at and think: I could have done that better. Or maybe I couldn't have done that better or whatever. I don't as a general rule look at old stuff too much. I read BLACK ORCHID recently because I was sent the Brazilian editions and started reading it through to start teaching myself Portuguese. So I read BLACK ORCHID again. Something I think I could have done better.

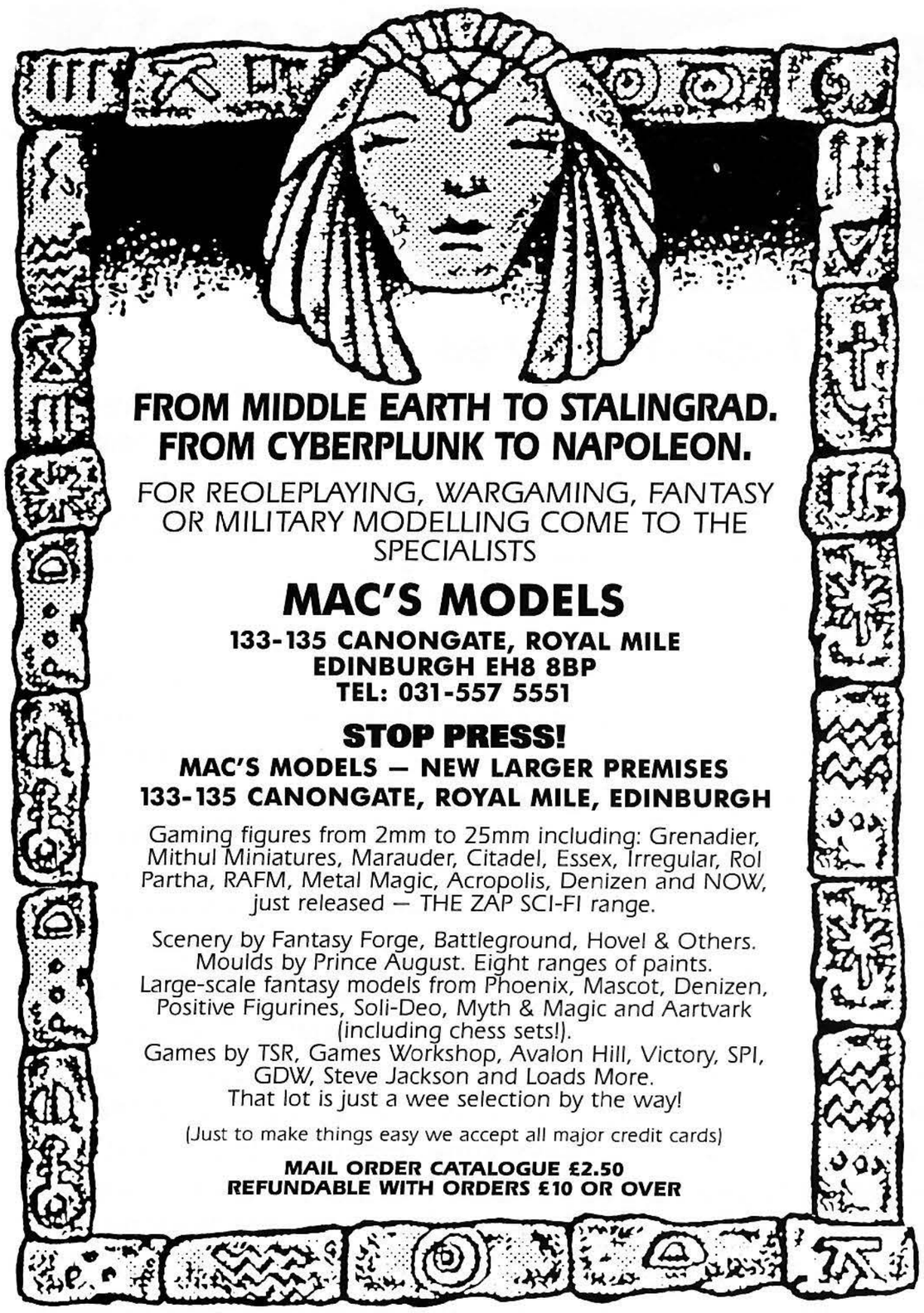
There is a Platonic ideal to anything you write before you start to write. Actually, this goes straight back to what I was saying earlier about choices. Because when you start a story, or anything, there are an infinite number of ways that it can go. And that's the delight of it for me. When you get to the end there is one way, that it **had** to go. That's why it can take me five or six days to write the first five or six pages of a SANDMAN. I will normally do the last eight pages in a night. By the time you get to page seventeen, the rest of it has defined itself. The branching paths are getting fewer and fewer with each decision that you make. It then goes off and it's graven in stone. Which is what the writing of fiction is all about.

Unless you're into 'Choose Your Own Adventure Games'. Even them all they do is give you the illusion of being able to follow paths and make choices. I don't think one should be able to follow *every* path, I think one of the great things about fiction is that it takes the Chaos of Life and feeds it back to one in a form that is emotionally satisfying.

The work that I tend to be excited about is the work that is buzzing and fresh in my mind. The work I tend to be most embarrassed and nervous about is the stuff that's just about to come out. Either a script I've just written or an episode I've just got back from the artist. And I'll look at it and think: 'Nodbody's going to like this, oh god we look stupid.'

We are twenty-two issues into SANDMAN and I've done that for Karen Berger (Editor at DC) and BLACK ORCHID, and she still has to ring me up, when I send her a script, and say: "Yeah, I liked it." Me at the other end going: "Well, really, is it OK?" Secure in the knowledge that it obviously isn't because I just wrote it.

Ah, away with ye.. she's wantin' to see France.
SHE's wanting to? It's YOU's been calling yourself "Marie Jeanette" since Mr. Sickert took us LAST time



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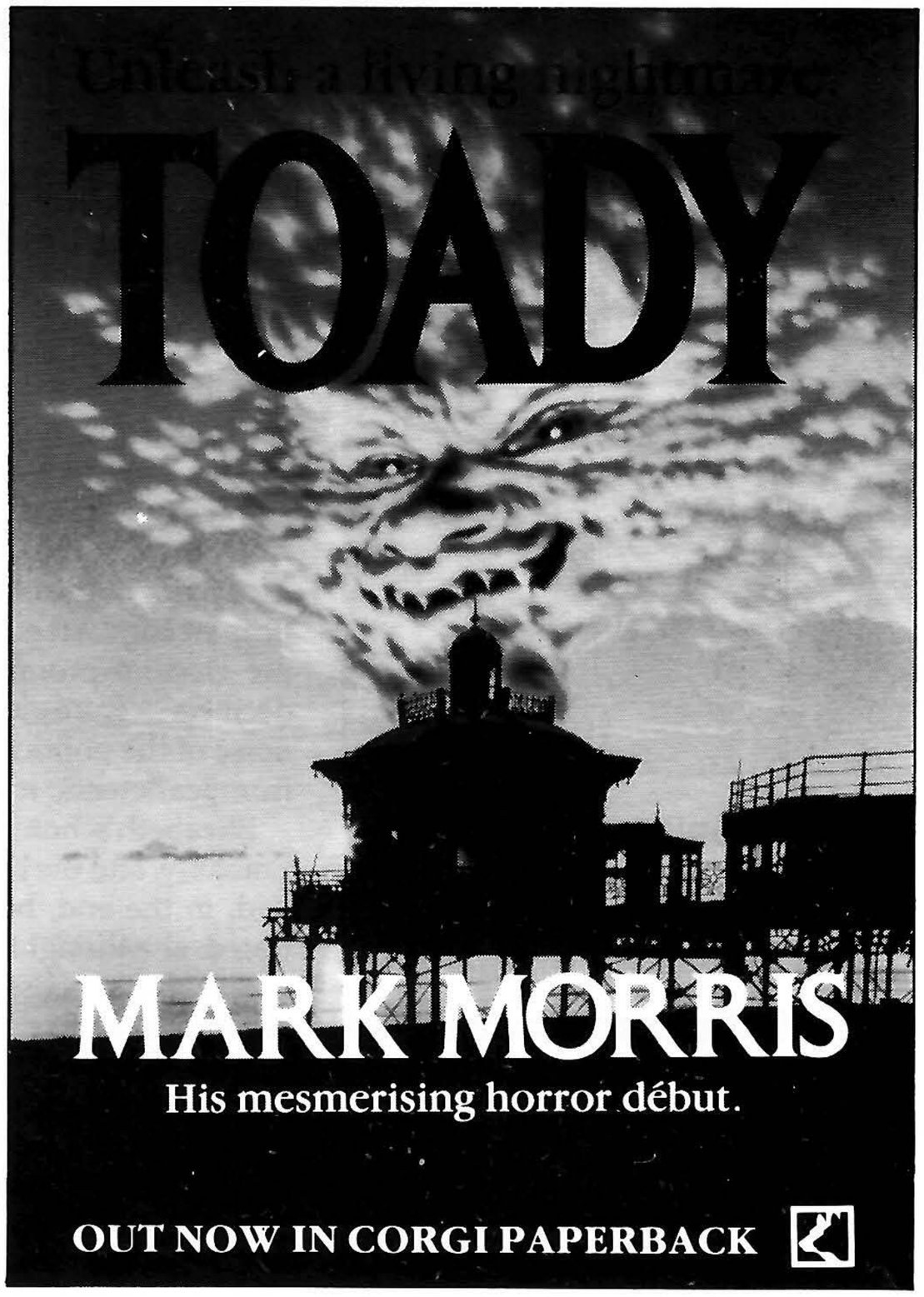

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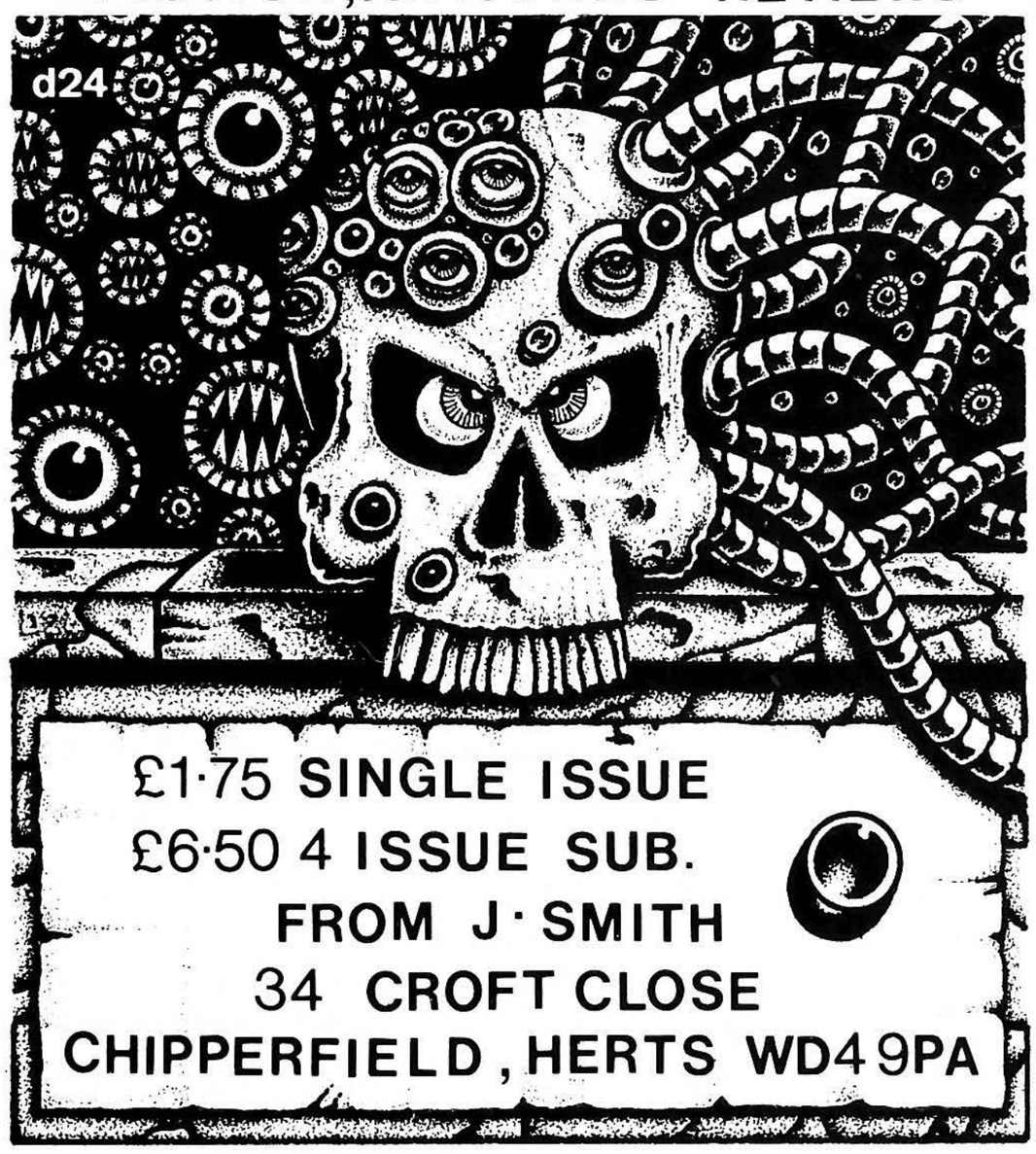

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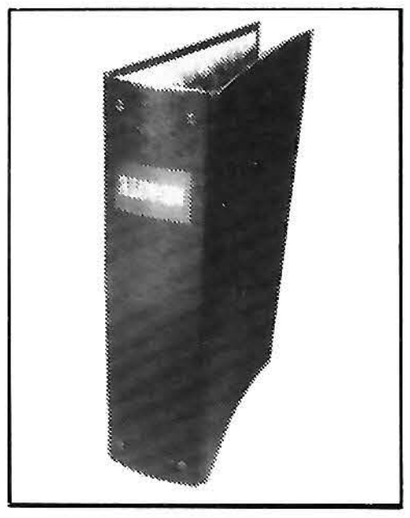

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More usually recognised as an anthologist and editor/ publisher of fanzines, David Sutton's occasional forays into fiction reveal a keen understanding of how to unsettle the reader.

Those of Rhenea

Except when she thought about it, the frenzy of Athens was a million miles away. When she did, flashes of its ramant lifestyle tore through Elizabeth's brain like an express locomotive.

The recent elections had daubed the city with myriadfold banners, hung between every available lamp-post and tree, or across buildings, advocating this party or the other. The equally strident calls to the faithful from the various political headquarters in Ormonia Square — their loudspeakers issuing the usual pre-election promises interspersed with Greek muzak at an ear-stinging rate of decibels — were guaranteed to inflame the heart of any Hawkwind fan. If it wasn't the noise of the political canvassing, to which you were even at risk of the trolley buses, from leafleteers, it was the incessant roar of traffic.

Elizabeth's hotel, the Alexandros, was just off Vas Sofias, up by the American Embassy, and the noise from the omnipresent automobiles and their obligatory horns had, in the end, become almost restful. Twenty-four hours a day Athens is penetrated, she thought, like some symbolic whore, by motor cars driving across the city at dizzying speeds. By night and the street lamps, the polluting fog of carbon monoxide fumes lay like a thick pale yellow duvet over the lower parts of the city.

Now though, Athens was a half-remembered dream. She had met Steve at a bar in Syntagma Square — no emotional entanglement so far, thank God — and they had both found they were going to Naxos in two days' time. Although the largest of the islands in the Cyclades, Naxos had no airport, which Steve had found surprising. Elizabeth was initially pleased, she didn't look forward to flying. The ten-hour ferry trip had, however, been crowded and unpleasant, with an unhelpful Greek crew. Only the barman made any attempt at friendliness and Elizabeth had been glad of Steve's company.

From the Venetian charm of Naxos town — it seemed that every Greek island had at one time bent to the maritime will of the great Italian empire — Steve persuaded Elizabeth on a boat trip to fabled Delos.

Steve had won her over with his surprised-looking, but attractive crew-cut, his cheap black plastic sunglasses, his camera and his anecdotes from Greek Mythology. He was on a sabbatical from Boston University and had plenty of time for travel, and he seemed to like to keep moving, even when he was staying in one place. She'd have been just as happy to stay on the beaches soaking up the sun, Naxos was relaxing, but a boat trip appealed to her, so long as it wasn't akin to the crossing from Piraeus.

The only thing which dampened her enthusiasm, albeit briefly, was the curious incident in the National Museum of Antiquities, which had taken place the day before their departure from Athens. The day after she'd met Steve, he took her to lunch and then to the museum. It was a vast, staggering array of treasures and she'd felt dwarfed by the sculpture, the gold, the decorative eloquence of Greek history.

For his part, Steve was less interested in the magnificence of Agamemnon's gold death-mask, or the bronze statue of Poseidon, and more inclined to the less dramatic pieces. Especially two steatite pyxis, flat trinket boxes. He lingered long over the cabinet in which they resided along with other, similar artefacts, looking at the items, labelled as having been discovered in a grave on Delos.

"See the carving on those lids?" he said to Elizabeth, who was itching to move on.

"Mmm." She was sure her growing boredom was beginning to show. It was, after all, merely grooves cut or chiselled into the lids.

"A spiral pattern. Very simple." He paused. What was he trying to say, Elizabeth wondered.

"Very like . . . *very* like spiral carvings in Britain and Ireland from four-thousand years ago."

"Is there a connection, then?" Elizabeth asked.

"A mystery at least," he replied mysteriously. "Prehistoric, pagan symbology . . ."

Elizabeth was about to say something, but noticed that Steve was lost, hypnotised, transfixed by the objects. She started down at them too, trying to see what it was that he was finding *so* fascinating. Then she was subjected to an optical illusion, or so she thought at first. As when sometimes a particular type of pattern in carpet or wallpaper defies the eye's usual ability to see two-dimensionality, and parts of the design

assume a three-dimensional region of space between the observer and the flatness of the motif itself. Shake your head, but it still insists in occupying space where the logical mind tells you it isn't. These coils were doing that to her. She wondered if that was why Steve was particularly taken with them.

She was about to phrase that question when she was overcome by a dizzy spell. The spirals, two maze-like hummocks, swum round making her feel as if she was turning in the opposite direction. A sensation of nausea tensed her stomach. Her legs were beginning to swing clear of the floor. Her arms flailed out to stop the unwanted motion.

"The breasts of the queen of ghosts," a voice spoke, though it did not sound like Steve's; it was harsher, rasping, ugly. The words stole over her emotions, taking on a weight far heavier than the mere syllables themselves. The voice continued:

"Are they not compelling?" It was spoken rhetorically. "The unwary traveller may succumb to her ways."

The malignant voice was gone as suddenly as it had appeared and so too had the illusion. Elizabeth found she was leaning into Steve's supporting arms.

"You all right?" he asked, his eyes expressing concern.

"Mmm. Dizzy, just a dizzy spell. It must be too warm in here."

"Well, let's sit you down for a while, eh?" Steve was leading her by the elbow to a nearby bench.

"No, really, Steve. I feel so silly. I'm okay. Really." Several people were staring and she felt slightly embarrassed. They sat nevertheless and Elizabeth was grateful to be able to feel cool marble walls at her back.

"You look like you're about to ask me a question?" Steve was rummaging in a bag for the guidebook.

Elizabeth was about to ask whether the wormy carvings had had a similar effect on him. Instead, she said, "who, or what is the 'queen of ghosts'?"

"Quite a question for someone with a professional lack of mythological knowledge," he replied.

She looked at him, smiled sweetly at his expression of mock disdain and said nothing. He finally relented. "She, the queen of ghosts, is Hecate, a minor deity in Greek myth, but she's assumed a wider influence world-wide — darkly linked to the ghastly underworld," he added with an amused, sinister flourish.

"Any connection with those trinket boxes?" Elizabeth found herself asking despite the thought of having to explain to him her auditory hallucination.

"Well, not that I'm aware of . . . Might be worth a little research though. But — "

Elizabeth knew what was coming and interrupted. "Well, I'm feeling much better now. Fancy a trip down Mycenae way? It's the next room . . ."

"I'm not too good in the sun," he had said, talking about sunbathing.

Naturally, Elizabeth had thought, his freckled body that had made him so attractive to her in the first place. And that wiry hair. She also liked the soft New England accent in his voice and his lack of brashness. It was interesting to discover a man less outgoing and more reserved than her, especially in an American. Her own job, in catering, meant she led a busy lifestyle, travelling and talking to clients about menus and venues; preparing the food and presentation with her small staff, and so on. Elizabeth's idea of a holiday, therefore, was to keep off her feet as much as possible.

The boat swayed rhythmically on a calm Aegean sea. The sensation was hypnotic. Elizabeth relaxed on a spare bit of deck in her bikini, her brown body deliciously warm, and she could almost feel her auburn hair becoming bleached in the hot sun. The mix of voices from the other passengers provided a background drone along with the sputtering of the boat's engines. It was dreamy and pleasurable.

She felt herself drifting off, hypnagogic, aware of a dream she was about to have, a strange encounter on Delos, deep into the phantasmal past when Zeus chained the wandering island to the bottom of the Aegean with adamantine chains.

"Here, hold this," Zeus said, his voice a soft lilt for such a god. Elizabeth stirred, unwilling to allow the waking dream to finish, but Zeus — no, it was Steve — shook her shoulder. "Don't fall asleep in this sun!" She opened her soft brown eyes and frowned at him.

"I was just about to have a good time with Zeus," she said, smiling. "And don't worry about me — it's you who need to keep out of the sun, Steve."

"Don't bother about that now, here, take hold of this." He handed her his rucksack loaded with camera equipment. "It might slip off the boat." He then turned to the rail and pointed his lens seaward. In the distance were islands. You couldn't escape them in this part of the world, but the tour guide was telling everyone that they could now observe Delos.

"There she blows," Steve puffed as he pushed his sunglasses back on his head, squinting his pale eyes briefly before hiding them behind the camera. Tourists were stirring, their lethargy over as the distant island closed towards them.

"She felt herself drifting off, hypnagogic, aware of a dream she was about to have, a strange encounter on Delos, deep into the phantasmal past when Zeus chained the wandering island to the bottom of the Aegean with adamantine cains."

"Shake your head, but it still insists in occupying space where the logical mind tells you it isn't. These coils were doing that to her. She wondered if that was why Steve was particularly taken with them."

"Here a dreamlike atmosphere washed over her and curious, unsurfaced fears slowly paced the depths of her mind. She had heard of the unseen presences supposed to stalk the island, Steve had told her that. She could believe it."

The dusky female Greek voice boomed from the loudspeaker once more. "Well ladies and chentlemen, we are nearly at the ancien' islan' of Delos. I c'hope you will enjoy your afternoon here. Remember, please," she continued while Elizabeth pulled on a pale pink blouse and shorts, "you belonck here only four 'ours and you mus' return back to the boat by four-thirty. Thankyou."

Within half an hour they had all disembarked from a small jetty and began to wander slowly inland under the dry, burning sun. Steve was risking his arms, exposed, exposed from the sleeves of a tee-shirt, but he wore jeans and hot-looking hiking boots. Elizabeth began to wonder briefly if her flat shoes were the right choice after all, looking at the terrain. Some people, she observed, had gone straight to the small museum to be in the shade or to find refreshments. Delos might well be an unmissable stop for Greek history, Elizabeth thought, but four hours in this heat, with virtually no shade, was almost frightening. The island spread out in front of them as Steve headed for the Agora, the large, worn grey blocks of the old market place reminding her that time had stood still here. In the distance the gentle slope of Mount Cynthus rose up out of the small island. Steve's camera began to click, providing a counterpoint to the never-ending rasp of the cicadas hidden in the sparse, sunbleached grasses that grew between the tumbled blocks of the ruins.

It had been hot in Athens, but this! Elizabeth began to perspire. How did Steve manage in those clothes, and the rucksack, she asked herself. Cynthus' domed peak was hazed by the rising heat and it made her think back to that evening, the lovely cool evening on Lykabettos where Steve had taken her after the museum. At night the distant lights of Athens had spread below them, a twinkling, moving wash of jewels. They had drunk some wine at the restaurant and felt the cool breeze while moths flitted around the lamps. And, she thought, they'd gone up Lykabettos hill in the cable car. Mount Cynthus had no such luxury to reach its ancient theatre and sprawling ruins. No cool wind either, but instead an open blue sky through which the sun flared, white-hot.

The heat-haze was apparently making arabesques in front of Elizabeth before she realised she was walking on the ancient floor of a house, its remarkably preserved mosaic surface a disturbingly familiar labyrinthine pattern. Steve had sat by the remains of a wall and was changing film. "Did you know," he said, "that this place was once *the* cultural and trading empire of the Greeks?" He clicked the back of the camera shut. "Got it." Elizabeth had heard the tour guide on the boat, but knew that Steve probably had even greater knowledge about the island. She sighed. It wasn't that she lacked interest, but the heat . . .

A lizard, the palest green colour, scuttled across marble walls. Cicadas hummed, Suddenly, she realised that there was no one else, other than Steve, nearby. The harbour was invisible, hidden by the contours of the land. The only sound was the island's ancient insect inhabitants. They stood between what remained of the walls of what was probably a merchant's house, on hot mosaics, with a well in the corner. Elizabeth looked down to see black water deep below, as unmoving as the fugitive shadow she glimpsed within it. Other crumbling buildings surrounded them, with a profusion of tall, yellow grass finding hospitality everywhere.

Steve stood up and began looking at his guidebook. "The French first started excavating here in eighteen-seventy-three," he offered. "And it's continued right up to the present day."

"Yes I know. This place is 'second only to Pompeii for archeological completeness'" Elizabeth quoted. "I heard the guide tell us." The parched grass was so still, like a photograph. Nothing stirred.

"But isn't it magnificent," Steve added, apparently unaware of an atmosphere Elizabeth was too easily detecting. "The shrines and temples and houses of a cosmopolitan city . . . "

"It's beginning to give me the creeps."

"What?" Click went the shutter. "It's all ruins. There's nobody here except us tourists."

"Where are they then?" she shuddered, despite the burning she felt on her legs. Elizabeth struggled with her thoughts, to find coherence, but the nagging worry didn't surface. "There might be snakes." It was the first thing she could think of saying.

"Well there are supposed to be poisonous snakes here . . . " Steve thought better of continuing. He put his arm round Elizabeth's shoulders and kissed her lightly on the lips. They embraced. No emotional entanglements, she reminded herself. She'd never see him again after her holiday. Nevertheless, she found the press of his body against hers comforting amidst those dry, ancient, watchful ruins.

Mount Cynthus' human artefacts climbed in front of them. Both Steve and Elizabeth were sweltering, sweating profusely now. The island was spreading out behind and below them, the sea a rich blue, invitingly cool. Steve was running through his films, this time using a zoom lens, back down to the distant architecture

of the Terrace of the Lions and the four remaining columns of the Poseidoniasts building. Elizabeth could at last see people, in the distance, like gaily coloured ants crawling about, and behind them the reassuring harbour and the tourist boats, lazily bobbing.

"Those lions used to border a sacred lake which was fed from a spring somewhere on this mountain, if you can call it a mountain." Elizabeth mumbled that she *had* heard as they stumbled on upwards, past the half-moon of the amphitheatre. She could hardly believe there had ever been surface water on such a desiccated island.

"Who was it again," she asked, "that this island was sacred to?"

Steve turned back to face her, his sunglasses a burnished black, hiding his weak eyes. "Delos was the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis, you know the offspring of Zeus and the mortal, Leto." Wasn't Artemis related in some way to Hecate? Steve asked himself inconsequentially.

"God of the Sun and Goddess of the Moon?"

"Yeah!" He was pleased that at last she seemed to be taking an interest in their expedition.

On a different tack Elizabeth sat and said, "D'you mind if we have a rest, Steve?"

He didn't say anything, but stood wiping the sheen of wet from his reddened brow. They had been on the island for an hour and a half and to her it had seemed forever. It was a fascinating place, of that there was no doubt, but the sun was merciless and the quiet stillness unnerved Elizabeth. It was so unlike the ruins in Athens, those ponderous columns and temples, full of people, surrounded by the heartening life of the modern city. Here a dreamlike atmosphere washed over her and curious, unsurfaced fears slowly paced the depths of her mind. She had heard of the unseen presences supposed to stalk the island, Steve had told her that. She could believe it.

"Why did they take away all the graves?" Elizabeth asked. It was merely one mystery, if not another, but those thoughts disturbed her, especially now they had almost become part of Delos. The rest of the four hours might be an eternity.

"In five-forty BC Delos was purified and all corpses removed from ground visible from the Sanctuary," Steve recapitulated his Greek history, nodding to the peak of the hill. "Then later all ancient tombs were excavated and removed. Since then," he added, "no births or deaths have been allowed on the island, nobody is allowed to stay permanently."

"And nobody lives here now . . ."

"They were all taken to Rhenea."

"Who, the inhabitants?" She removed a wet-wipe from her bag and breathed a languid sigh as she wiped her face with the cold tissue. Dust scrambled as her foot slid quickly away from an unusually inquisitive lizard. A few forlorn poppies stood out against the stones from whose cracks they grew.

"No," he answered, "the cadavers. They were re-buried over there, behind Hecate's Isle." There was that name again! He pointed to the nearby island which was clearly visible from the hill. It looked much like any small Greek island from where they sat, but Elizabeth thought it would be better not to visit such a place. She hoped that there was not some additional boat trip available to Rhenea. It was unlikely. After all, they'd only two hours left on Delos before their little Greek craft would drift, seemingly unaided, back to Naxos by way of Myconos. That deep Aegean sea beckoned to her, a safe haven from the morbid marble statuary of Delos.

It was with a feeling of immense relief to Elizabeth when finally they reached the sanctuary area, despite its history of despoiled graves and disinterred corpses. That last few minutes and she thought she might pass out. Mount Cynthus had been beaten on one of the hottest days of the season. She could see that Steve was also visibly wilting. His camera had for some time hung unused from its neck strap, swinging slightly as he negotiated the tumbled terrain. The panorama below them was magnificent, but Elizabeth was in no mood to appreciate it. She headed numbly for the sanctuary.

She had expected something more imposing, but it was merely more tumbled masonry. There was a cave, however, albeit one man-made. It consisted of a natural fissure with a pitched roof of large, dressed granite slabs forming a peak about six feet high. At the entrance there were also a number of smaller stones forming a wall and leaving a narrow passage into its short twelve foot length. The most immediate thing Elizabeth noticed was that it offered the one thing that the whole of the rest of Delos did not — shade. She gratefully scrambled inside.

"I wonder if we'll have time to look round the museum?" Steve slid in beside her.

Elizabeth looked at her watch, frowning at the thought of a hasty scramble back down the hillside. "I don't think there's time . . . "She began to feel terribly tired and wanted most of all to sleep, just forty winks before venturing out. "I must have a breather, Steve." Her worried frown caught his wandering attention.

"Sorry, Liz, I wasn't thinking. We've still got an hour. You relax here for twenty

"He took cautious steps, fretfully searching the ground for pitfalls and in his concentration the lone, quiet yowl of a dog went unheard. Had he heard the sound, his myth-imbued mind would immediately have realised its portent."

minutes." He stood up. "I'll do a bit more exploring — around the old boneyard! Here — " He opened his rucksack and took out a couple of cans of beer, still reasonably cool despite the temperature to which they had been subjected.

"Oh, manna!"

"Forgot I'd brought them until now. Delos is a pretty striking place!" Steve gave her one of his idiotic waves from his brow with his head leaning to one side and a half-sick smile on his face. Elizabeth smiled at him encouragingly. He departed the cave, for a moment his body engulfing the light and making the interior suddenly very dark.

Elizabeth relaxed, savouring the relative coolness of the cave. She took the rucksack and bundled it behind her head, stretching out. Gritty dust clung to the film of perspiration on the back of her legs, but she forgot any discomfort as sleep insisted her eyes close and her mind begin to drift right-brain-wards, slowly spiraling into slumber, down like a journey back through time's indefinable continuum. She snapped back alert briefly, her left brain rightly reminding her that she had not quenched her undoubted thirst with one, or possibly both the cans of beer. The moment passed unfulfilled and sleep gratefully came.

"Oh no!"

"Mmnn . . . ?" Elizabeth was, curiously she thought for her, quickly pulling off her shorts. Bits of sharp stone cut into her buttocks. A figure leaned over her in darkness, its face totally obscured. She could feel heat coming from its body and she knew it was a golden, beautiful body, like a classical Greek statue. She gasped as the masculine shape moved forwards.

"Wake up!" She felt her shoulder being shaken vigorously, but not the expected penetration.

"Oh . . . Oh! Steve . . . ?" She was at last awake and didn't much like the timing. "What's the matter with you?" It was only then that she noticed that in reality it was nearly dark as in the dream. "What time — "

"We've missed it, damn" he cursed. Elizabeth stood and ran to the cave's entrance. Dusk was beginning to carpet the distant sea a rich, wine-dark red from the setting sun. So, they'd missed their boat back to civilisation.

"Where've you been, Steve?" Elizabeth felt slightly angry, but it was tempered with a desire to laugh at the absurdity of their situation.

He looked her her sheepishly. "I fell asleep as well." No more explanation was necessary. Delos had secured their undivided attention for at least the next eighteen hours.

"Perhaps they're still waiting," Elizabeth said as the realisation sunk in, but no, she could still see the harbour and it was deserted. Nearby the museum building was in darkness. They were the only people left on Delos.

"I'm sorry, Liz." He looked like he genuinely was too. "We can sleep in this cave and be down at the harbour by midday tomorrow. We'll be back on Naxos in time for dinner."

Elizabeth examined her surroundings, but the dream she'd half remembered had decided her. "I'd rather not," she answered him. "Can't we find a place nearer the shore?" But of course to trek down the hill in near darkness was foolish; it was bad enough trying avoid the ankle-twisting overgrown chunks of Delos' former glory in daylight. Before he could answer, she said, jokingly, "No. I know this is the safest place to stay now. At least we have shelter should it rain!"

They both sat quietly for a hour, saying very little. The sun finally gave up the day and the night was blacker than they could ever have imagined, except that there were stars in the sky, and over on Rhenea a few lights twinkled. A far cry, Elizabeth recalled, from Athens' bejewelled night, where every precious gem's colour was represented by streetlamps, houses, automobiles, displays, and sudden diamond-sparks from trolleybus cables.

Dinner consisted of a can of beer each — how glad Elizabeth was that sleep had saved them! — and a few biscuits and pistachios Steve found in his rucksack. They both ate and drank slowly; there was a long night ahead and it was still quite early. There'd be no browsing down by the quayside to find a suitable taverna. No embarrassed look around the owner's kitchen to choose their meal. No lingering, warm wash of wine and calm sea to lull the senses.

Later, the quietness began to make Elizabeth's flesh crawl. The atmosphere didn't appear to affect Steve, who was leaning, like himself, at the entrance to the grotto, breathing deeply and gazing enigmatically at the starry heavens. For some reason the expected rasp of the cicadas was absent and the sea was so calm and distant that any sounds it issued did not reach them. She felt far from sleep now, yet yearned for a dream as powerful as that she had had earlier, as eloquent as all her dreams had been whilst on vacation. She hoped that the cool night would not drive her inside the cave. There might be snakes in there now. She was reminded of the serpentine forms that writhed beautifully, yet balefully she thought, in mosaics on the floor of one of the

roofless temples they'd visited; of scorpions and the whole spectrum of beasts which, to modern Western minds, held evil intent but which soared to god-like heights in the ancients' collective mind.

When she looked up again out of her reverie, Steve was no longer there. Now where had he gone?

"Steve," she called gently towards the cave. There was no answer. The answer, she smiled, was simple: a call of nature. A small breeze cracked the dry grass at her feet and whispered around the sanctuary like a primeval, probing oread, wandering up the hill from its pleasures among the ruins and wondering at the strange being sitting in front of the antrum where once Apollo had been worshipped. Maybe that mountain nymph had never seen human-kind for hundreds of years on those desolate Delos nights?

A mist was drifting up the hill and before he knew it, Steve was engulfed in its clammy caress. If anyone had asked why he had wandered off just then, he doubted he could consciously say. It felt the right thing to do, but the grey swathes curling around him were nightmarishly unreal on this warm night. He ought to return to Liz and try to settle down and get some sleep. Nothing could be done until morning. If he turned carefully he could easily grope his way back without getting lost.

He took cautious steps, fretfully searching the ground for pitfalls and in his concentration the lone, quiet yowl of a dog went unheard. Had he heard the sound, his myth-imbued mind would immediately have realised its portent. It was made only once, though, before the hag came to him. Hecate, the Goddess that Appears on the Way, was monstrously garbed in the raimant of a cadaver, Her dark hair like strings of snakes, her face dry and mummified, her eyes luminous shards. Under a shroud of fine-spun silk her withered breasts were clearly visible. His eyes met hers through the fog and he knew that time and reality had finally become spent forces for him. If the ritual purifications of Delos had been started by the Priests, these things were now continued under the guidance of Gods. Delos was still a place where no living being lingered after dark and if the dead returned, it was to ensure that sanctity was forever preserved.

Steve was surprised at his mind's ability to think rationally as the corpse approached. Large hands, talons of aged flesh, reached to grasp his skull and he managed to scream only briefly as the cold, hard white thumbs forced their way between his lips and pressed his vibrating tongue down the back of his throat.

As the breeze died away a noise below startled Elizabeth, somewhere on the darkened slope of Cynthus. It sounded like tumbling stones or loose footfalls among the debris. Why would Steve go that far for a pee?

The night held a beauty that transcended her mundane thoughts. Its beauty was dark and alien, thousands of years old and still breathing a life as real as the lambent lights which now played over the remains of the cemetary. Elizabeth peered through the gloom, puzzling at the sudden flickering, flame-like flashes of light. Fireflies, maybe.

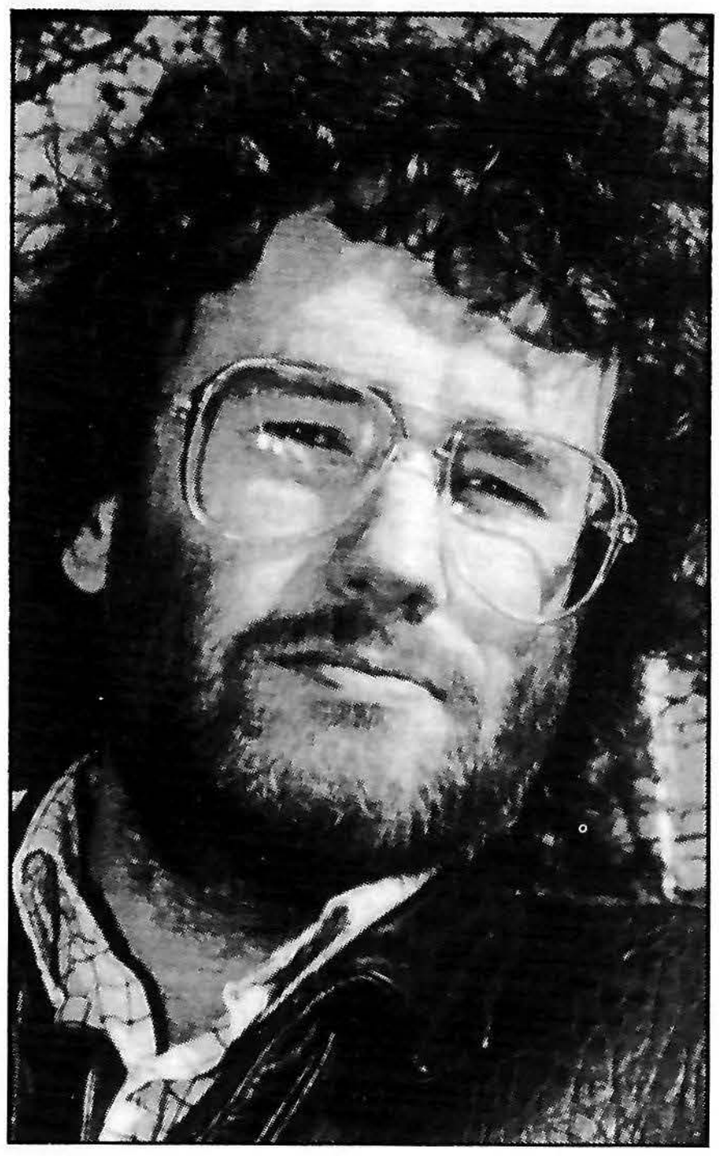
A glow seemed to lift above Hecate's Isle, or it may have been over Rhenea beyond. Immediately Elizabeth thought about the purification pit where Delos' long dead were re-lain. Loose chippings of stone began again to tumble down the slope, with the loud clarity only former silence can imbue such sounds with.

"Steve . . . ?" Elizabeth stood and glanced around, finding only fear in her inability to penetrate the darkness. It was almost as if he'd never been here, a form as hallucinatory to her now as the city of Athens was. She began to feel anger at her descent into irrationality, but that descent was inexorable, driven by a growing terror at the dreamlike predicament she was in. She wanted to shout, to scream out Steve's name, he must be nearby. He must . . . Had he caught the boat back to Naxos and left her stranded with a mischievous hallucination of himself for a companion? It dawned on Elizabeth that Steve may never have been real. Now she was being absurd!

She finally overcame her fear of the benighted hill and took to the friendless maw of the cave. She felt her way in, choking on the dust her shoes raised. Something — only for a second did her mind feel relief that Steve had returned — with strong, cold hands grabbed her arms and she could smell an obnoxious, a poisonous fotor from the darkness a little above her face. "Ste — !" But it wasn't, couldn't have been him.

The invisible figure was merciless in its actions, which Elizabeth quickly realised were those of something not living. Above all, the stench of death was forced into her nostrils and dry, crumbling flesh pressed down upon her. She was saved by the darkness from seeing the face that belonged to the hard, cold, half-slimy tongue which opened her lips and forced its attentions upon her own. Elizabeth felt silken fabric between her and the pressure of iron-hard breasts; and the posturing proboscis opening her jaws to cracking point while long-dead saliva dribbled down her throat. The sensation sent her reeling into the safe haven of unconsciousness, but not before her mind induced her to believe that this visitant to Delos was one of Rhenea's long dead guardians.

Dawn was like a red curse over the slopes of Delos. Steve and Elizabeth mused over it as they gazed hypnotically across the bay. They didn't really appreciate their changed viewpoint or their new flesh, such as it was. The vista from Rhenea was very familiar and had been for millenia. They sighed together and, gathering up age-tattered robes, made their way back down a long underground tunnel to join their purified dead as the sun's strong light began to bask the empty slopes of distant Cynthus. They knew that Apollo's birthplace could never harbour the dead, or the living, for long . . .



Science fiction? Fantasy? Horror? Who cares as long as it's good. And personal, as Iain Banks discusses with Stan Nicholls.

MAKING UP GOOD TUNES

Iain Banks writes science fiction simply because he has always loved reading it. "The field has changed and become a lot more bland and takes itself rather seriously these days," he says, "but that feeling of opening an SF book not knowing where you were going to be or what sort of characters, or species, you were going to meet, is still a great attraction.

"Were you going to find yourself in the mind of some sentient plant on a planet orbiting a dwarf star; travelling through time, or riding a starship? That sense almost of danger, of elation in not knowing what was coming next, was exhilarating. I just liked reading the stuff, and knew I'd enjoy writing it; it wasn't sort of thought-out or analysed.

"And I guess I feel a bit more at home writing science fiction. It's always with a slight feeling of trepidation that I approach the research necessary for a non-genre book. But with SF, especially the stuff I'm writing, you can make a lot of it up yourself. So in a way science fiction chose me."

He displayed an early interest in words and writing. "I always did well at English in school. What I liked doing most was composition. 'Write a story starting with this sentence . . . ', that sort of thing. I'm a child of the TV age, and I started off making-up television stories in my head, rather than novels. It was only later I thought it would be nice to write something in novel form. That was when I was about fourteen, I think."

His latest novel, USE OF WEAPONS, has the same setting as his previous books CONSIDER PHLEBAS and THE PLAYER OF GAMES; a universe dominated by a pacifistic social system called the CULTURE that, ironically, is prepared to resort to dirty tricks and murder in order to preserve galactic peace.

USE OF WEAPONS is Banks' eight book, and had a considerably smoother ride to publication than his first, THE WASP FACTORY, which was greeted with extensive critical acclaim. "It went through six publishers before Macmillan took it," he recalls. "As it was a first novel and I was basically a nobody — I didn't have an agent or anything — I was literally taking it around in my lunch hour and dumping it on receptionist's desks. One of those publishers was Gollancz, who rejected it. I heard from Malcolm Edwards, who later joined Gollancz as SF editor, that he had seen the reader's report on it, which said, 'Quite well written, but far too strange ever to get published'!

"THE WASP FACTORY was a lot more bizarre than I thought it was. I regarded it as a fairly run-of-the-mill weird story; I didn't expect it to cause such a fuss, or to be pilloried and praised to the extent it was. I was slightly bemused by the extremity and the polarisation in the reactions to it.

"At the same time I had thought that, having written so much SF before, I'd try something that wasn't science fiction so I could have a better chance of getting published. In that sense it was fairly cold and calculating almost. To an extent I did know what I was doing — I thought what I needed was a short, snappy book with a neat title that grabbed you very quickly."

He was that rare creature, an author plucked out of the stream of unsolicited manuscripts publishers call the slush pile. "Yes, it had that fairytale aspect to it, I suppose. The funny thing was that everyone said I was an overnight success. In fact, I'd written about a million words and half a dozen books before it, so an 'over decades success' might be more appropriate. It took me sixteen years to get anything published."

All but one of those early novels was submitted to publishers "But they were usually very badly typed and there was absolutely no way anybody was going to read past the first paragraph. I've written two of them since, but some of the very early stuff will never see the light of day. As long as the plot is good and it hasn't been superseded by events, I'm quite unrepentant about going back to old stuff, because

there is an imaginative spark there."

He describes himself as a schematic writer. "I like to know what's going to happen, and I like to know what the end of the book is going to be. Ever since the second book — which went on for ever and I ended up with about 400,000 words — I've worked to a plan. There are always variations and surprises that happen in a novel anyway, but as a rule I want to have things mapped out in advance. The outline might only be just a page, but I like that security.

"The trick is to have just enough of a framework to support you and which lets you sit down and start writing the next day, rather than think, 'Oh God, what happens now?' But not so much that you are constricting your imagination. Otherwise you've got no leeway, you get bored, and things start to go in the wrong direction."

Banks is a fast worker and can turn out a first draft in as little as two months. "I'm dead lucky. It's pure jamminess really; I just happen to be able to write fast. What I try to do is a certain amount per day. On a good day that's about 5000 words, not including revision, which implies, if you take off the weekends, twenty-five thousand words a week. In theory you could finish a book in three weeks, but of course it never works like that. USE OF WEAPONS took two months. It was originally one of those older books, finished just before THE WASP FACTORY, but it's been rewritten extensively. The basic story's still there, but there's a lot less purple prose, and more internal resonances. It's much more complicated and deep."

He cites Franz Kafka and Hunter S. Thompson as literary influences; Joseph Heller's CATCH 22 also had a big effect on him when it came out. "However there's a difference between influences and writers I admire and respect. My favourite writers, dead ones, are Tolstoy and Jane Austen. Very conventional. Even my favourite live authors are white, male and very old — Graham Greene and Saul Bellow. Unfortunately I don't write like any of those people! And never will. I'm afraid.

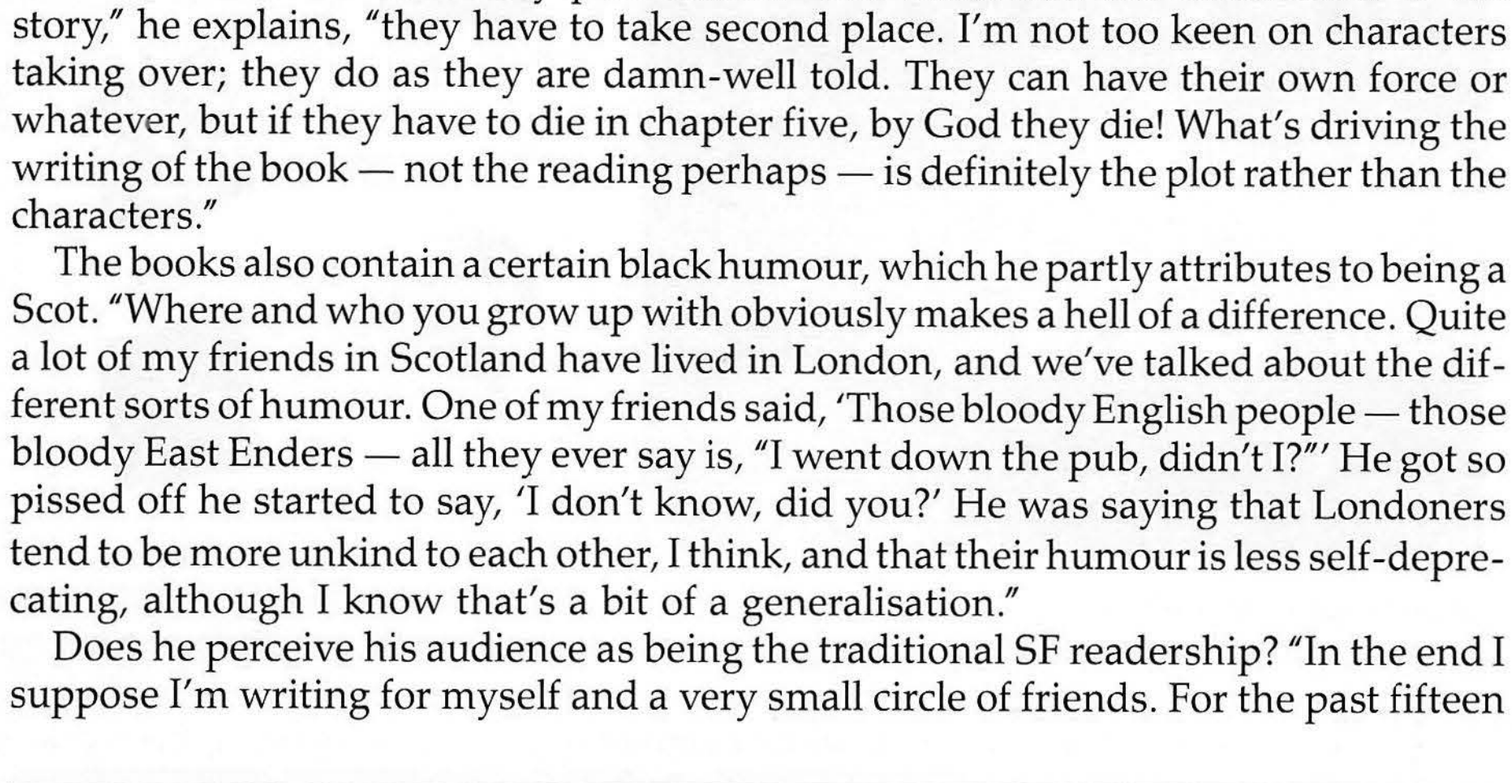
"Sometimes it's the *idea* of a book. A couple of years ago I went back to Mervyn Peake's TITUS GROAN — the GORMENGHAST trilogy had been really special to me when I read it in high school — but I found that I didn't think the writing was particularly good. Nevertheless the idea of it, and its whole baroque complexity, was very important. The driving imagination behind it was so weird and magnificent that you just glossed-over the occasional slightly cliched descriptions."

Like Peake, Banks presents us with colourful characters — CULTURE assassin Cheradenine Zalawe in USE OF WEAPONS being a good example — but contends that his books are essentially plot-driven. "The characters are subservient to the story," he explains, "they have to take second place. I'm not too keen on characters taking over; they do as they are damn-well told. They can have their own force or whatever, but if they have to die in chapter five, by God they die! What's driving the writing of the book — not the reading perhaps — is definitely the plot rather than the characters."

The books also contain a certain black humour, which he partly attributes to being a Scot. "Where and who you grow up with obviously makes a hell of a difference. Quite a lot of my friends in Scotland have lived in London, and we've talked about the different sorts of humour. One of my friends said, 'Those bloody English people — those bloody East Enders — all they ever say is, "I went down the pub, didn't I?"' He got so pissed off he started to say, 'I don't know, did you?' He was saying that Londoners tend to be more unkind to each other, I think, and that their humour is less self-deprecating, although I know that's a bit of a generalisation."

Does he perceive his audience as being the traditional SF readership? "In the end I suppose I'm writing for myself and a very small circle of friends. For the past fifteen

"I'm a child of the TV age, and I started off making-up television stories in my head, rather than novels. It was only later I thought it would be nice to write something in novel form."



"As it was a first novel and I was basically a nobody — I didn't have an agent or anything — I was literally taking it around in my lunch hour and dumping it on receptionist's desks."

years — the past twenty years, damn it — I've been forced to.

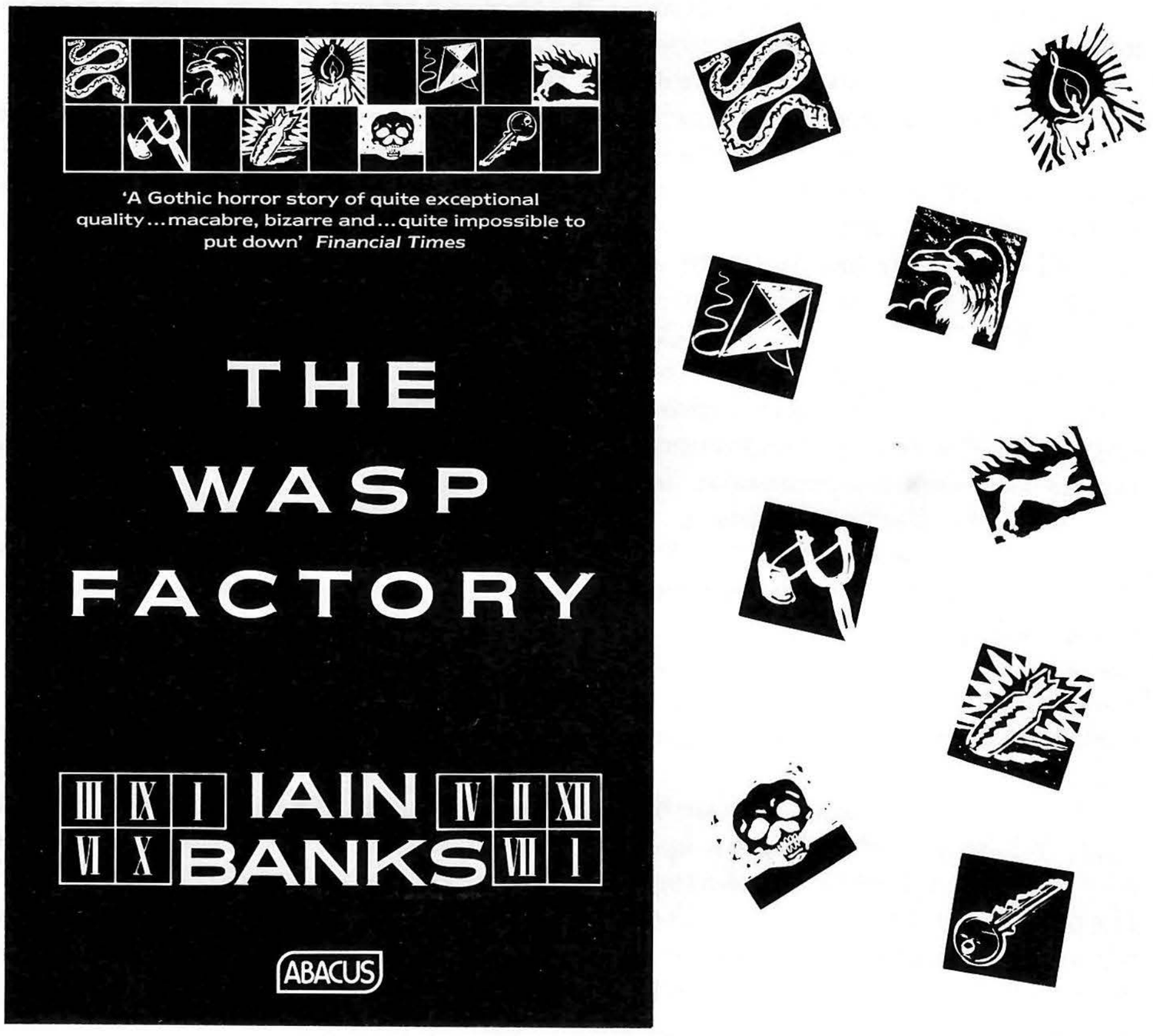
"One thing I notice when doing signing sessions, library talks and that sort of thing, is that I seem to attract a lot of students, which I find extremely encouraging. But basically I think my audience consists of people a bit like me — a frightening thought in any other context! Unless you're deliberately writing for some PR man's perception of a market, or you're writing for the Booker Prize or for the critics in the quality papers, you have to write for yourself. It's productive self-indulgence really.

"I do think it does take time to write well. It takes longer to make up good tunes, if you like. Perhaps music comes naturally; writing is much more of a developed talent.

"But I'm a wee bit worried about where the next generation of good SF writers are coming from, or just good writers of any kind. Publishers tend to go for the tried and trusted stuff they know will sell and the death of the mid-list has been talked about. The unfortunate fact is that the editors and the sales people who are driving this will agree that it's desirable to bring on fresh talent, but it's just not profitable to publish most new writers.

"As long as the plot is good and it hasn't been superseded by events, I'm quite unrepentant about going back to old stuff, because there is an imaginative spark there."

"A lot of people say we should kick science fiction back in the gutter where it belongs, which I've got a lot of sympathy for, I must say. It's got corporatised, I think, and a bit boring. I don't know whether it can be saved or not. Maybe the people who


'A Gothic horror story of quite exceptional quality... macabre, bizarre and... quite impossible to put down' Financial Times
THE WASP FACTORY
IAIN BANKS
ABACUS

used to go into science fiction are nowadays more likely to start a band or make videos or something like that. Perhaps that's where the energy is going to go in the future. Which would be a shame."

He acknowledges that there may be an element of political allegory in his work. "I suppose it's there to an extent, maybe in something like PLAYER OF GAMES, where a lot of shannanigans the empire gets up to are quite obviously taken from real life and what governments do. I'm not sure how conscious it is; sometimes it's just something that crops up and I think I'll play up to that. I'd like to put more of a political message in the books, as it were, but would have to think of a mechanism whereby I could do this."

"I'm not too keen on characters taking over; they do as they are damn-well told. They can have their own force or whatever, but if they have to die in chapter five, by God they die!"

His *Culture* universe is rich, complex and not a little dangerous. He has no doubt he would like to live in such an environment. "Oh God, absolutely yes! The *Culture* is my idea of utopia. It's as close as you can get to utopia with what we regard as recognisably human stock. I'd love to live there. That's been the whole guiding principle behind the thing really. I just thought of the best possible place you could live in. It doesn't always come out that way in the books, because I'm trying hard not to make it look so wonderful and goody goody and all the rest of it, but absolutely, yes."

Will he stay with the science fiction *genre*? "I intend to. My next novel is somewhere between science fiction and fantasy, but very hard-edged. It's almost more of a comment upon fantasy. It's not a CULTURE book, it's something quite different, but it's not set on Earth, either. It's called AGAINST A DARK BACKGROUND. You'll love it."

PORTFOLIO

We asked for fresh talent and here it is in spades — the darker vision of Barnsley-based Dean Ormston. This represents his first professional published work.

Well, sort of.

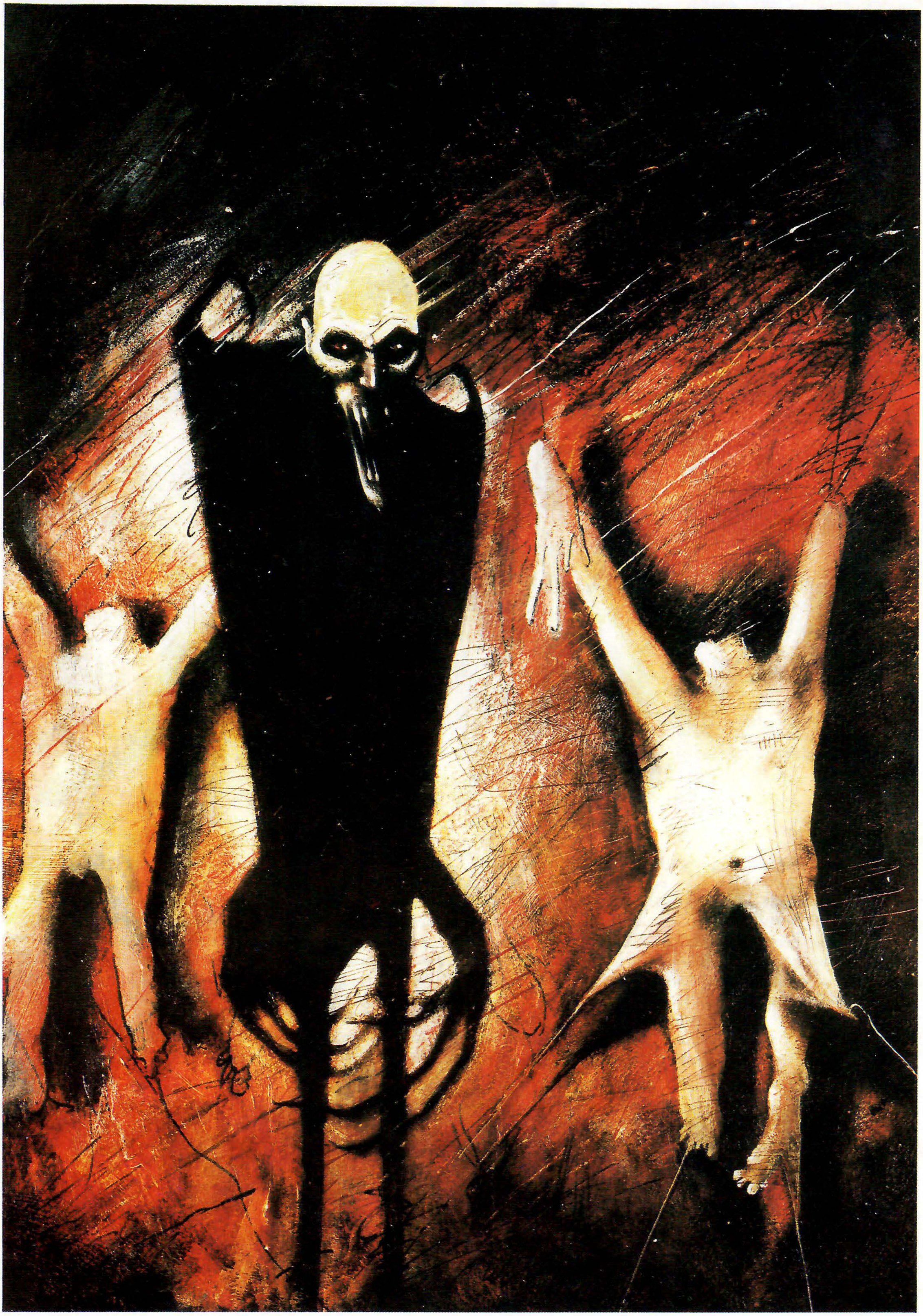
'I've done a number of video covers for Empire Video,' he explains. 'Horror and that. The trouble was there were all for the export market, so you'd have to go to Greece or somewhere to see them.'

Coming up in the UK, however, is work for Fleetway's REVOLVER at the start of 1991 — work with author Simon Spenser called 'Stickleback', which we preview here. Other work with Simon will follow — including the gruesome tale of a vampire who collects human skin.

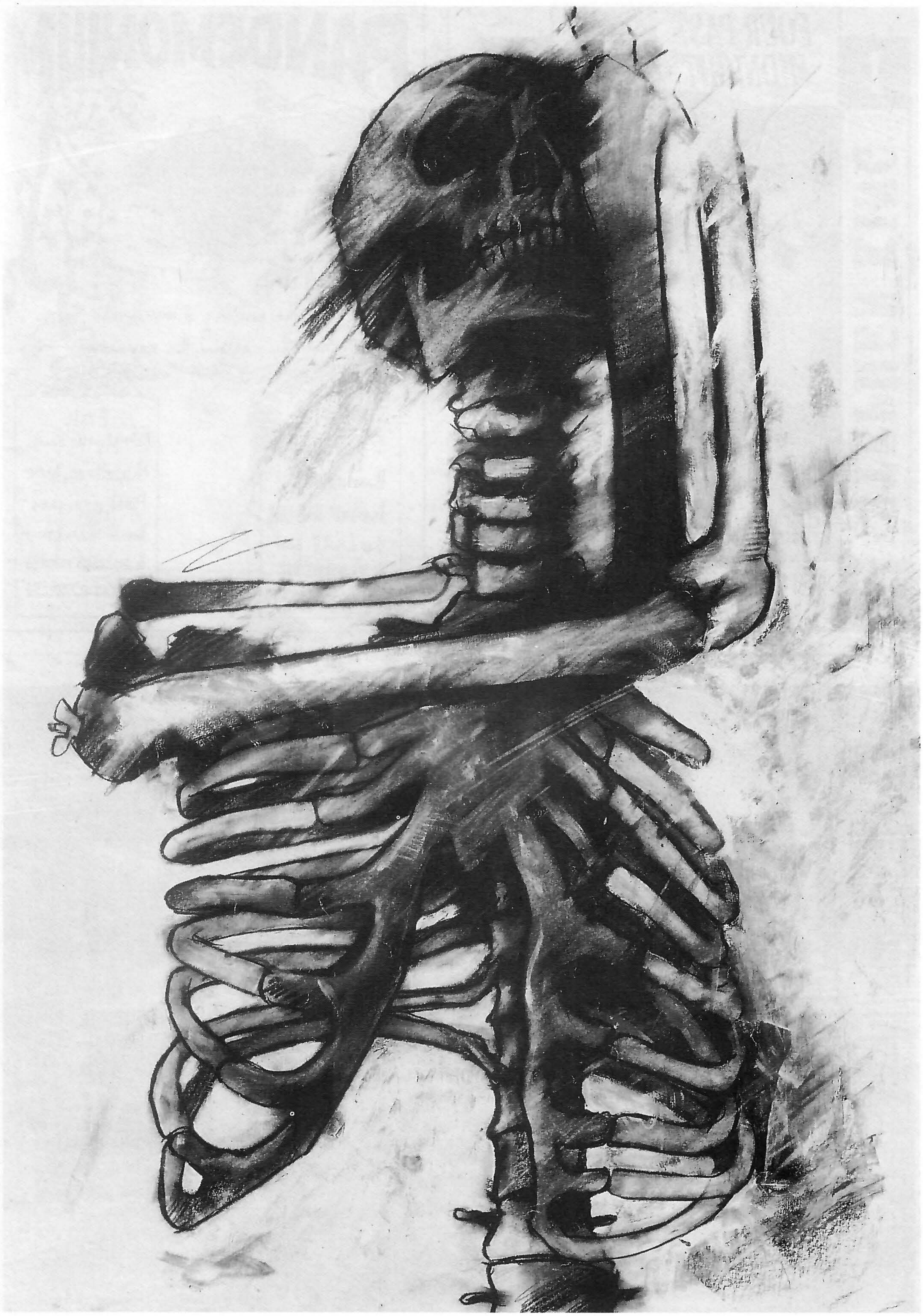
Ambitions? 'To work in comics, at least for as far as I can see ahead, although storyboarding films would be great.' Influences? 'McKean, Sienkiewicz, Pollock and so on.' Anything else? 'I work part time at Nostalgia & Comics in Sheffield.'

Not for long, we predict. If other publishers are as knocked out by Dean's work as we were, then we can expect to see his artwork all over the place.

Covers, comics, you name it — drop us a line here and we'll pass you onto him.



Skeleton Crew, November 1990



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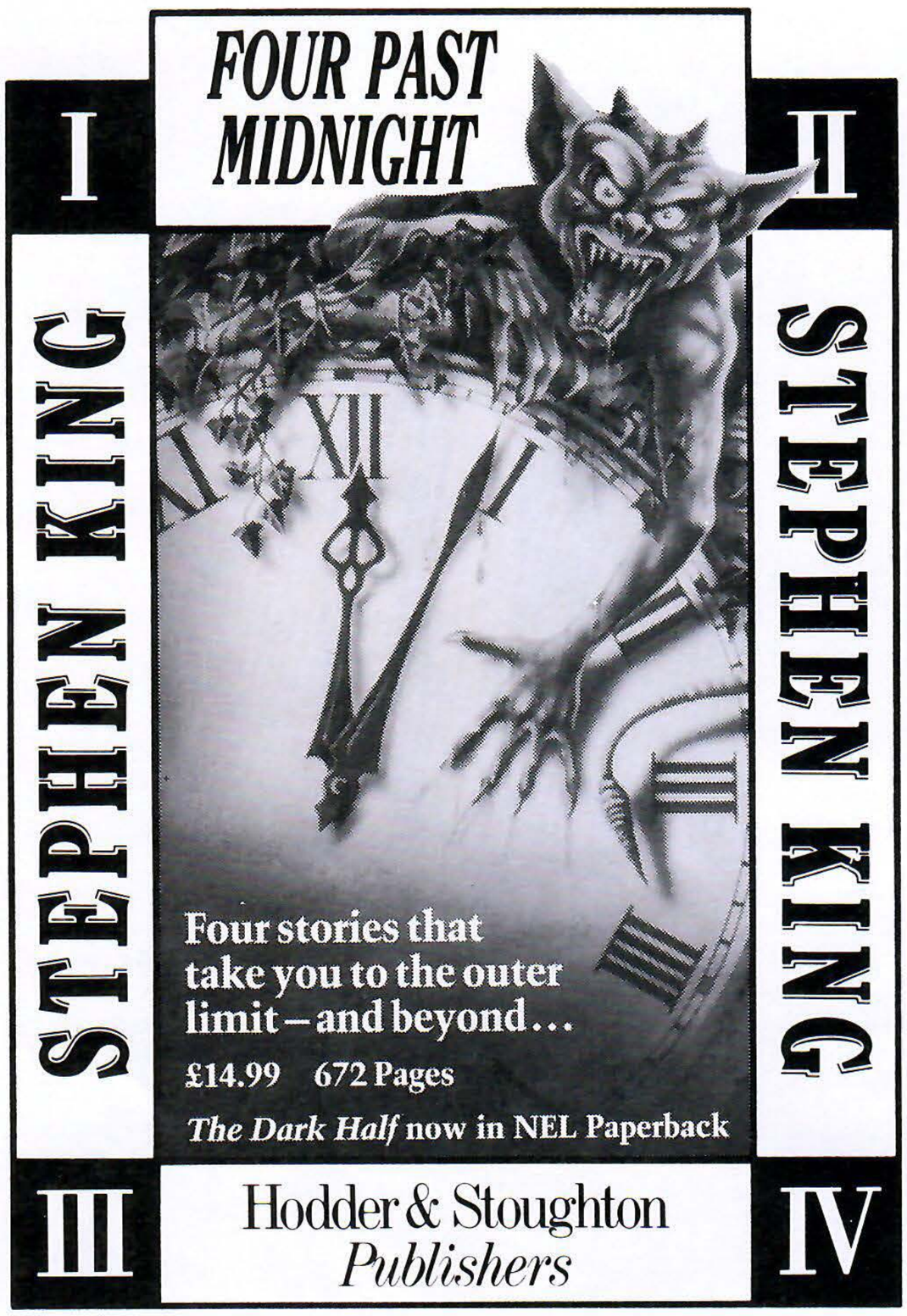
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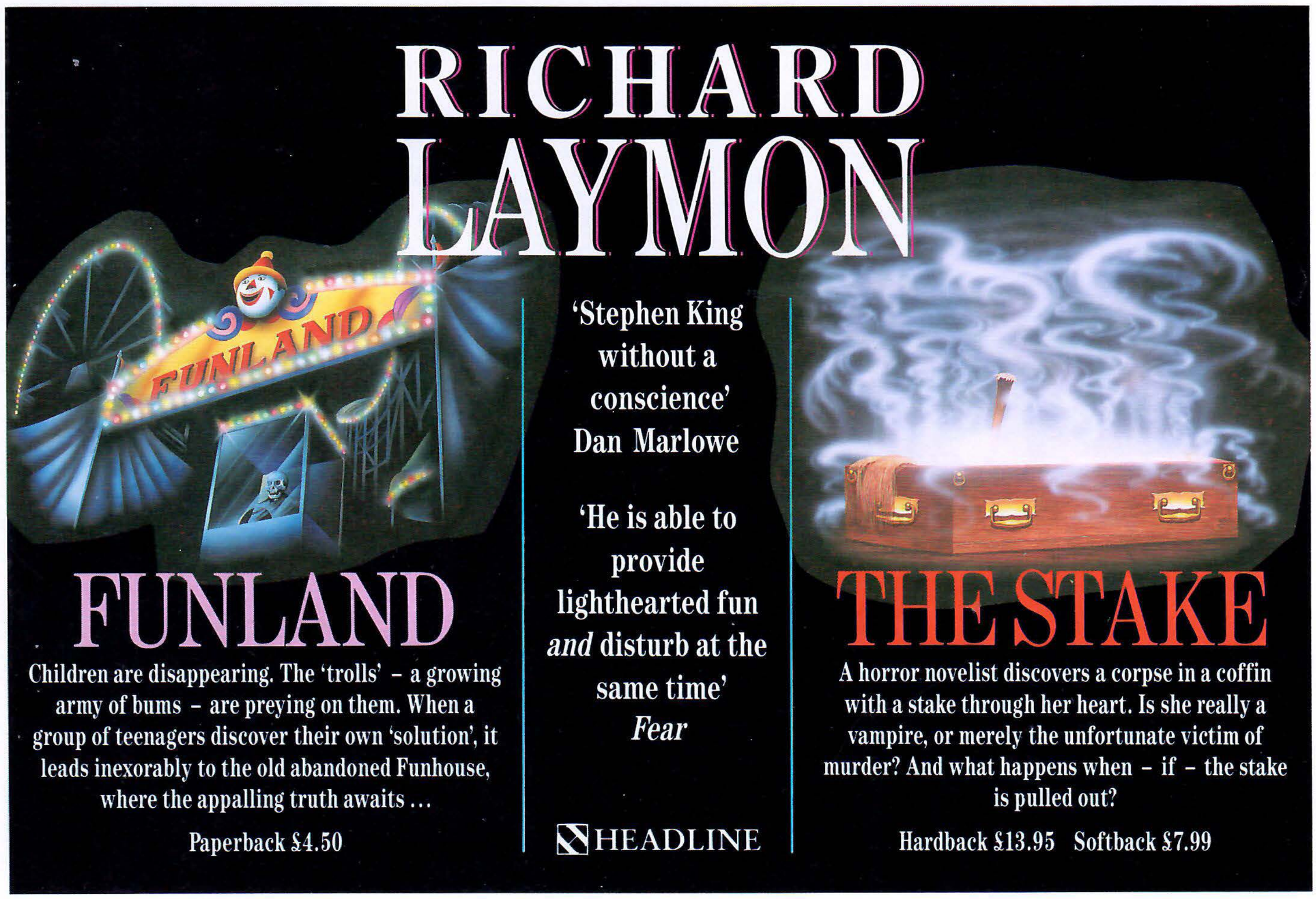
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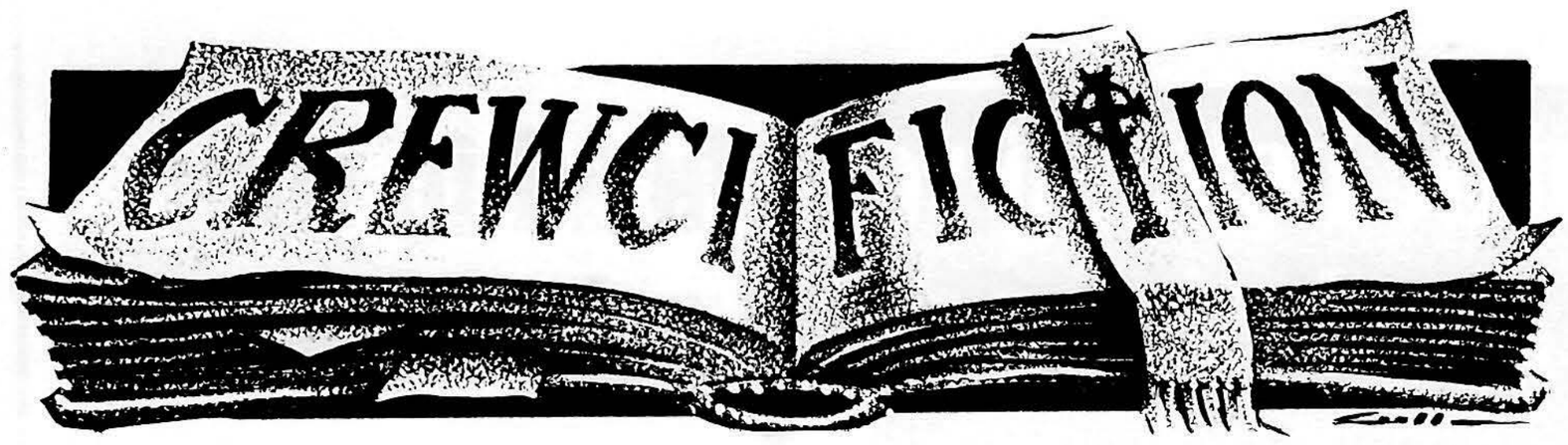

Cleanliness can be a virtue. It can also be an obsession, as Richard Holland describes in *Clean*.

My house is a clean house. I hope it is still a clean house. I worked hard to clean it, but it seemed to keep itself clean, too. Which is why I loved it.

I do not love this place, which should be clean. See, there — a dead fly has been left in the net curtaining; and in the corner of the windowsill, in that grime, I think those are broken legs.

I stay sat here, on the far side of the room. Insects are a problem to me. They upset me. There is something about them that is alien, that I find evil, and if I found an insect in my house, as I did occasionally, I had no option but to kill it. I did not like to do it, but how would I know where it might find me, what it might do if I did not?

Spiders are the worst. They run at you. They have eight legs. And they have eight eyes, too. Did you know that? Eight tiny eyes; that stare. There is nothing behind those tiny eyes but cold. They are their own masters.

One spider I found in my bathroom by the towels. It clutched the wall. It was horrible. I watched it, it must have been for hours. Then, it twitched one of its legs, and I ran out. I had to kill it, but what could I kill it with? Downstairs, I found yesterday's "Telegraph", and rolled it up.

I crept up the stairs, terrified. I was terrified the spider would not be there. That it had hidden from me, roaming my house where it had no right to be, waiting to startle me again. I think it had moved half an inch. I had to kill it. I would get no rest, wondering, if I did not, although to you who do not know it might seem cruel.

I stretched out my arm with the "Telegraph" as far it could, to keep me further from it. It had to be done in one quick blow. To pat it lamely, so it would fall to the floor and run at me — no, no! To half hurt it so it lay broken and shuddering, needing to be finished, never dying till I steeled myself to strike it again — worse even. One quick, hard blow. I closed my eyes. Tears starting. It wriggled as if to move and screaming I lashed out and hit it square. It came off the wall and I dropped the paper and hurried out.

I knew it was dead, but I was too sick to dispose of it then. I went to bed and did not use the bathroom at all that night. I suffered a bad dream. I think I dreamt that I was a spider, crawling. Crawling through the dark. It was a dream I dreamt sometimes.

I had to face it in the morning, but imagine my relief when I found it gone. No corpse. The Telegraph lay where I had dropped it and, although a brown mark showed my murder on its paper, the hideous dead thing was nowhere to be seen.

I believed, because I loved it so much, that it was my house that had cleaned it away. Had cleaned what I felt too weak to. I had evidence to suggest my house did these things.

Once I had my kitchen infested. Beetles, hundreds, shiny black, rattling, sickening, ever more pouring from a hole in the lino. I screamed and screamed under my breath, gurgling at the sight of them, but my terror that they might spread further conquered my loathing and I fought with my feet to kill them. I squashed them all, every one, until there was a great, shiny pile I was exhausted, and felt ill as I went up to sleep, too aware that my first task the following morning would be to scrape them up in my shovel to be rid of them. That night I had my crawling dream again.

But when I came down, I found the pile diminished. There seemed half the corpses that there had been after my extermination of the night before My house, I agreed to myself, had helped me.

But then came the night I found I was wrong. The night I saw an arachnid like a black man's hand hovering on my bedroom wall. It had been there the whole time that I had. I had changed for bed in its presence. It had seen me naked, and it trembled on the wall in triumph at my discomforture. My yell made it shake as the book in my hand flew and killed it with a hard thump, leaving one leg hanging as its burst body fell onto the carpet out of sight.

I think perhaps I fainted. I dreamt I was crawling. And then a lorry passed by the window of my room and its loudness made me wake. And I found the truth.

I must have always sleepwalked. Because I lived so long on my own no-one knew to tell me. I woke to find myself on my knees on the floor where I had killed the giant spider. And I can still remember its salty taste as it curled back on my tongue.

Sometimes I think I can see a spider crawling in this room. And sometimes I cannot eat the breakfast that they bring for me.

"The night I saw an arachnid like a black man's hand hovering on my bedroom wall. It had been there the whole time that I had. I had changed for bed in its presence. It had seen me naked, and it trembled on the wall in triumph at my discomforture."

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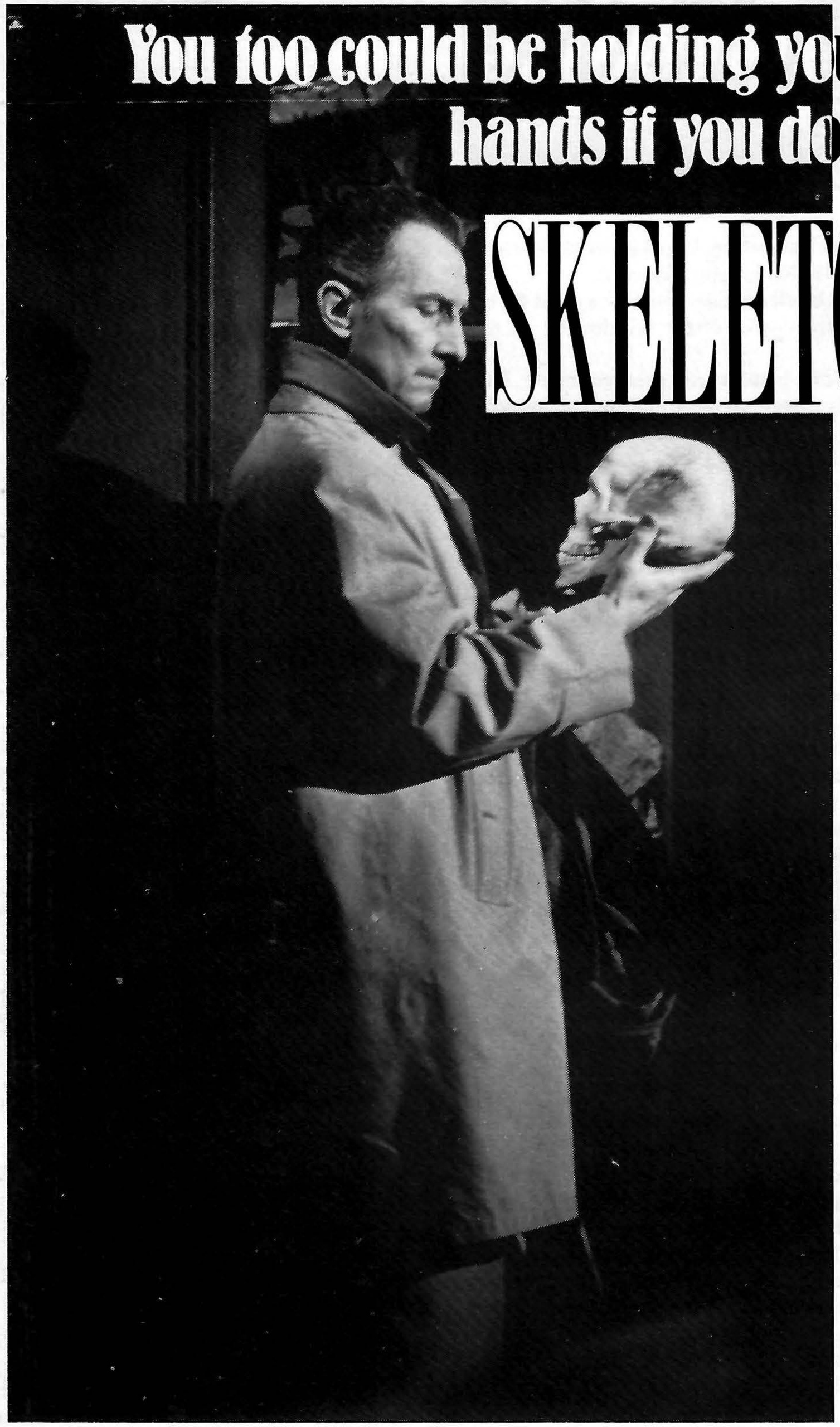

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Everybody reading this magazine must love horror, but where did our obsession begin. In the first part of a short series, Di Wathen searches for the roots of horror in children's literature.

Horror writer Ramsey Campbell once said: "I was first terrified by a book when I was six year old or so; this was George MacDonald's PRINCESS AND THE GOBLIN. (It) cost me several nights' sleep. "I'm sure we all have similar memories, be it from Grimms' fairy tales, Sendak's classic picture book WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE with its larger-than-life Wild Rumpus, or the claustrophobic underground passages in Alan Garner's WEIRDSTONE OF BRISINGAMEN. Children love to be frightened, when the monsters can be safely tucked into the pages of a book. "I read about made-up monsters to learn how to deal with the real ones", says Sarah in CALLING ALL MONSTERS, a novel by Chris Westwood, and this theory explains much of the attraction of horror, and its theraputic effect (contrary to the belief of moralists who only see it as harmful).

Traditional fairy tales set a love of the macabre very early in life, particularly those of Grimm and Perrault: HANSEL AND GRETEL, JACK THE GIANT KILLER and BLUEBEARD immediately spring to mind. Interestingly, in the Perrault version, LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD ends abruptly with the wolf eating our heroine, whereas the Grimms take it a stage further: the huntsman cuts open the wolf to allow Riding Hood to escape, fills the wolf full of stones and sews it up again, resulting in its death! And they say horror comics are bad for you! (In The Children and Young Persons [Harmful Publications] Act of 1955, actually, but that's another story).

I have memories of strewn limbs and decomposed tigers in the LITTLE BLACK SAMBO books, which have, quite rightly, since been banned for their racial overtones rather than their horror. And what could be more fraught to a young mind than a huge chicken rushing about, distraughtly crying "The sky is falling!" and believing the world is about to end. Indeed, it does for said chicken and friends, for they all get eaten alive on their way to seek help. This pleasant little outing is CHICKEN LICKEN, "a classic of its genre".

STRUWWELPETER, a German cautionary tale, has the image of a boy whose hair and nails would not stop growing. With his huge nimbus of hair and his long, sharp talons, all those years before Freddy Krueger, he presents a truely frightening apparition which lingers in the mind with nightmarish clarity.

Maurice Sendak needs no introduction. WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE caused a storm on first publication — many felt ut was too scary for their protected offspring. His later OUTSIDE OVER THERE is more genuinely spooky, as well as offering no explanation for the action. His illustrations to other writers' books can be just as effective, such as the Devil in ZLATEN THE GOAT or the huge images straining against their confining frames in THE JUNIPER TREE. No-one can draw such evil babies as Sendak — they have to be seen to be believed!

Recognised illustrators who can convey dread are N C Wyeth and Mervin Peake, both with their TREASURE ISLAND portrayals, and Arthur Rackham in his more fraught pictures. More recently, Edward Gorey gave us his eccentric THE DWINDLING PARTY, complete with pop-up graveyard. Raymond Briggs moved away from mainstream picture books with FUNGUS THE BOGEYMAN and his harrowing WHEN THE WIND BLOWS. In a more humorous vein are Mercer Meyer's MRS BIGGS AND THE WIZARD with some definite Gremlin forerunners; the LITTLE DRACULA books by Martin Waddell and illustrator Joseph Wright; David McKee's NOT NOW BERNARD and Jan Pienkowski's HAUNTED HOUSE pop-up book.

A superb, stylish version of SIR GAWAIN AND THE LOATHLY LADY, retold by Selina Hastings and illustrated by Juan Wijngaard, has the most grotesque hag imaginable — all the more effective because of the books overall elegance.

Of all the illustrators working in the field, Charles Keeping is arguably the best. His illustrations to Alfred Noyes' THE HIGHWAYMAN must be some of the most horrific and brutal to grace the pages of a "children's" book, though the corpses in THE GOLDEN SHADOW (by Edward Blishen and Leon Garfield) must run them a close second. Blood and gore in full, explicit black-and-white! THE LADY OF SHALOTT, BEOWULF and THE WEDDING GHOST are equally memorable. Also worthy of mention are CLASSIC TALES OF THE MACABRE and CLASSIC GHOST STORIES, both selected and illustrated by Keeping. No-one can produce better ghostly visions that he can — you can taste the hoar and dankness clinging to his atmospheric

"I have memories of strewn limbs and decomposed tigers in the LITTLE BLACK SAMBO books, which have, quite rightly, since been banned for their racial overtones rather than their horror."

"The descriptions are a little lurid: The body had been savaged . . . the clothes were ripped and the flesh literally torn along one side. Wide patches of exposed bone showed through."

wraiths. The choice of content is pretty traditional: Poe, M R James, A M Burrage and the like.

Indeed, horror anthologies for children tend to contain much traditional "adult" material. Helen Hoke's famous alliterative titles such as DEVILS DEVILS DEVILS, SINISTER STRANGE AND SUPERNATURAL, GHASTLY GHOULISH GRIPPING TALES feature H P Lovecraft, Robert Bloch, Ray Bradbury and other recognised masters. SINISTER . . . is noteworthy for the inclusion of Jack Finney's CONTENTS OF A DEAD MAN'S POCKET — not for vertigo sufferers! Ramsey Campbell's GRUESOME BOOK has stories by Bloch, Richard Matheson, August Derleth, Brian Lumley and Campbell himself, and contains a warning "NOT to be read by the very young".

GHOST, SPOOKS AND SPECTRES is a collection edited by Charles Molin, a pseudonym of William Mayne, best known for his own, somewhat oblique, novels, which could perhaps earn him the title of children's Robert Aickman. The anthology itself contains all your old popular favourites.

Some collections do concentrate on accepted children's writers. These include Jean Richardson's COLD FEET and BEWARE! BEWARE! with contributions by Berlie Doherty, Peter Dickinson, Robert Westall, Vivian Alcock and John Gordon; Pamela Lonsdale's SPOOKY STORIES OF THE SUPERNATURAL with Alcock and Leon Garfield; Jean Russell's METHUEN BOOK OF SINISTER STORIES featuring, once more, Vivian Alcock, Joan Aiken, Marjorie Darke and Joan Phipson; and THE JON PERTWEE BOOK OF MONSTERS, edited by Richard Davis with stories by Tim Stout, David Campton and John Halkin among others.

A long-running series, THE ARMADA GHOST BOOK, is aimed at this younger age group, many of whom probably go on to read THE PAN BOOK OF HORROR STORIES in all its volumes!

Chapbooks, which began in the 16th century, were forerunners of the modern series. Sold for only a few pence up to the early 20th century, they were cheap and often badly written and produced. They did, however, contain titles such as JACK THE RIPPER, BURKE AND HARE and THE CRIPPEN HORROR. How could one resist spending ones pocket money on these and other such delights?

Much more recently, a couple of worthy horror series have come on the market — FLESHCREEPERS and HAUNTINGS. FLESHCREEPERS are the B-movies of the two, featuring FRANKENSTEIN, DR JEKYLL & MR HYDE (an excellent, no-holds-barred retelling by Samantha Lee) and BLOOD FROM THE MUMMY'S TOMB among the titles. The cover states "Unsuitable for children under 10". The descriptions are a little lurid: "The body had been savaged . . . the clothes were ripped and the flesh literally torn along one side. Wide patches of exposed bone showed through." (from FANGS OF THE WEREWOLF).

HAUNTINGS are more tastefully designed and feature many top authors, with 15 titles so far. Perhaps the best is NOBODY'S CHILD by Anthony Masters, set in a former children's home during demolition. It conveys a real sense of atmosphere and ghostly presence. Gary Kilworth's THE RAIN GHOST mixes the present with the past to good effect in a bleak Derbyshire setting, and Carolyn Sloan's DON'T GO NEAR THE WATER has a scene of pure jolting horror towards the end which makes this exciting book memorable.

Downmarket are the ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND THE THREE INVESTIGATORS series of books. Despite Hitchcock's name and promising titles, these are juvenile mysteries with everything neatly explained. Still, they make a welcome change from Enid Blyton!

A fairly new phenomenon is the DIY adventure book. Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone pioneered these with their FIGHTING FANTASY series ("All you need are 2 dice, a pencil and an eraser"), offering such titles as DEAD OF NIGHT, resplendent with Martin McKenna illustrations, demons, zombies, abominations and lots of thick fog; VAULT OF THE VAMPIRE; CREATURE OF HAVOC, etc. You make your decisions, throw your dice and abide by your lot.

Another series, CHOOSE YOUR OWN ADVENTURE, is based on pure decision making — do you choose A or B? — and not all the titles are horrific, or even fantasy. Of those that are, YOU ARE A MONSTER has you, dear reader, transformed into a hideous monster in the laboratory of an evil doctor (where else?), and your choices bring you to one of thirteen conclusions: you can end up restored to your former self, remain a monster living in a swamp, make it in monster movies, or wind up dead! Other titles include VAMPIRE EXPRESS and TERROR ISLAND.

Half a novel, half a challenge is KNIGHTMARE, based on the TV series. The first two-thirds set the scene and bring you to the point of play. Armed with pencil and paper, you may begin to collect spells, instructions and information, and so go forth — and may the best man win!

Which just leaves us with one-author collections and novels, by talented writers like Lois Duncan, Christopher Pyke, Joan Aiken and Robert Cormier. Next issue we will cover all these and more in Part 2 of SEDUCTION OF THE INNOCENTS.

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Des Lewis is breaking rapidly out of the world of the amateur fanzine. Apart from this story, he's also appearing in both *The Year's Best Horror XVIII* and *Best New Horror I. Dagon* recently published a D.F. Lewis Special.

Tiff

I felt myself to be a stranger.

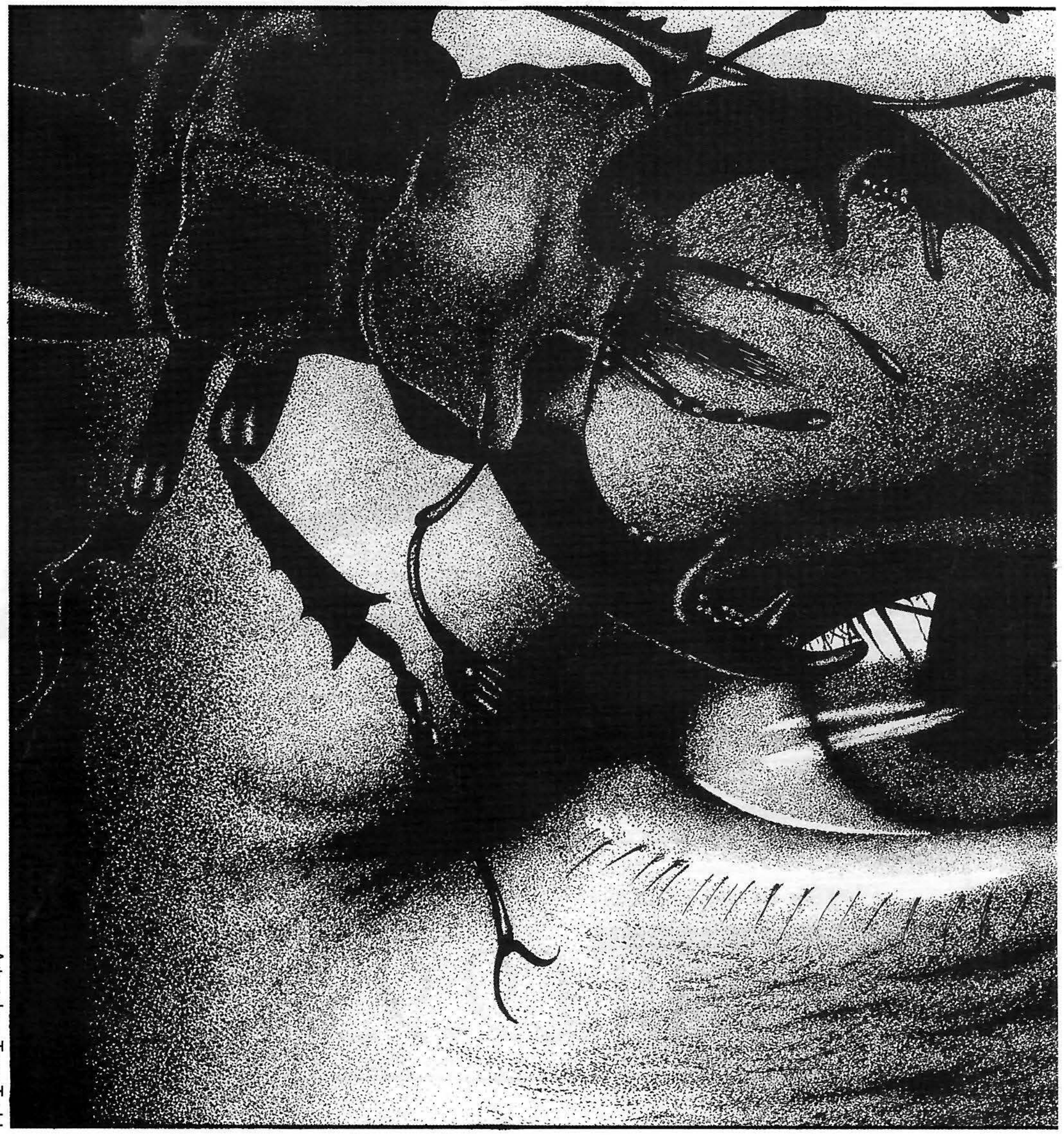
The street along which I walked was lit only by the windows of the terraced houses stretching interminably either side of me. All were curtained across, some with swish, home-tailored fabrics, printed with every combination of colourful abstracts, flowers and stripes; others were dowdy and tawdry, no doubt hanging in textures of dust; a few had straggling hems, threadbare patches, frays, tears, nicks and even sickening stains.

One window, as I passed, much to my bewilderment, was completely uncurtained. I could see a single bare bulb flexing from a crumbling rose in the ceiling and shining out with glowing quilts of yellow light across the glistening pavement.

I pulled the coat collar tighter over the adam's apple, since the wind had taken a renewed tug upon me, mixed with sleety rain and gnawing bonechills.

I stopped, walked back, peered over the squat garden wall into the empty window. I had always wondered what really went on in this town after dark. And, if curtains are drawn together, there must be a reason for so doing. And, if undrawn, there may be just some clue . . .

Within my over-large wellington boots, I stood on tiptoes, but still could not see much beyond the bulb (which I now realised was within a transparent shade), the peeling blistered wallpaper (or was that just the pattern?) and a tallboy chest with



Artwork — Tony Todd.

what looked like rags (or clothes at a loose end) hanging out of the ill-fitting drawers.

There were some miniatures on the wall, which were too far away to make out. The large carriage clock below them on the chipped baroque mantelpiece told a time which seemed to have stopped for more years than it had stood there.

The longer I loitered and stared, the more details of the interior emerged. There was actually someone standing by the mantelpiece, leaning upon it, the pipe in his mouth giving off more smoke than billowed from the local factory and disfiguring his face. He was evidently sounding off to a person sitting under the window inside the room. Perhaps a girl with eyes weltering in pools of tears.

Then the words themselves could be heard, as the man by the fireplace got his gander up and pitched his voice further into the street:

"You slut! A daughter of mine dressed . . . like that! I can very nearly see every bit of your body which God gave you to hide. I'll tell you again, you're not going out till you've changed into your winceyette . . ."

I crawled over the sodden front garden and cowered under the window-sill to hear the girl's response:

"All my friends dress like this to go to the dance band . . . And . . . And . . . You only say what you do because you're *jealous*. Your eyes are always all over me! No wonder Mum has taken to her bed . . ."

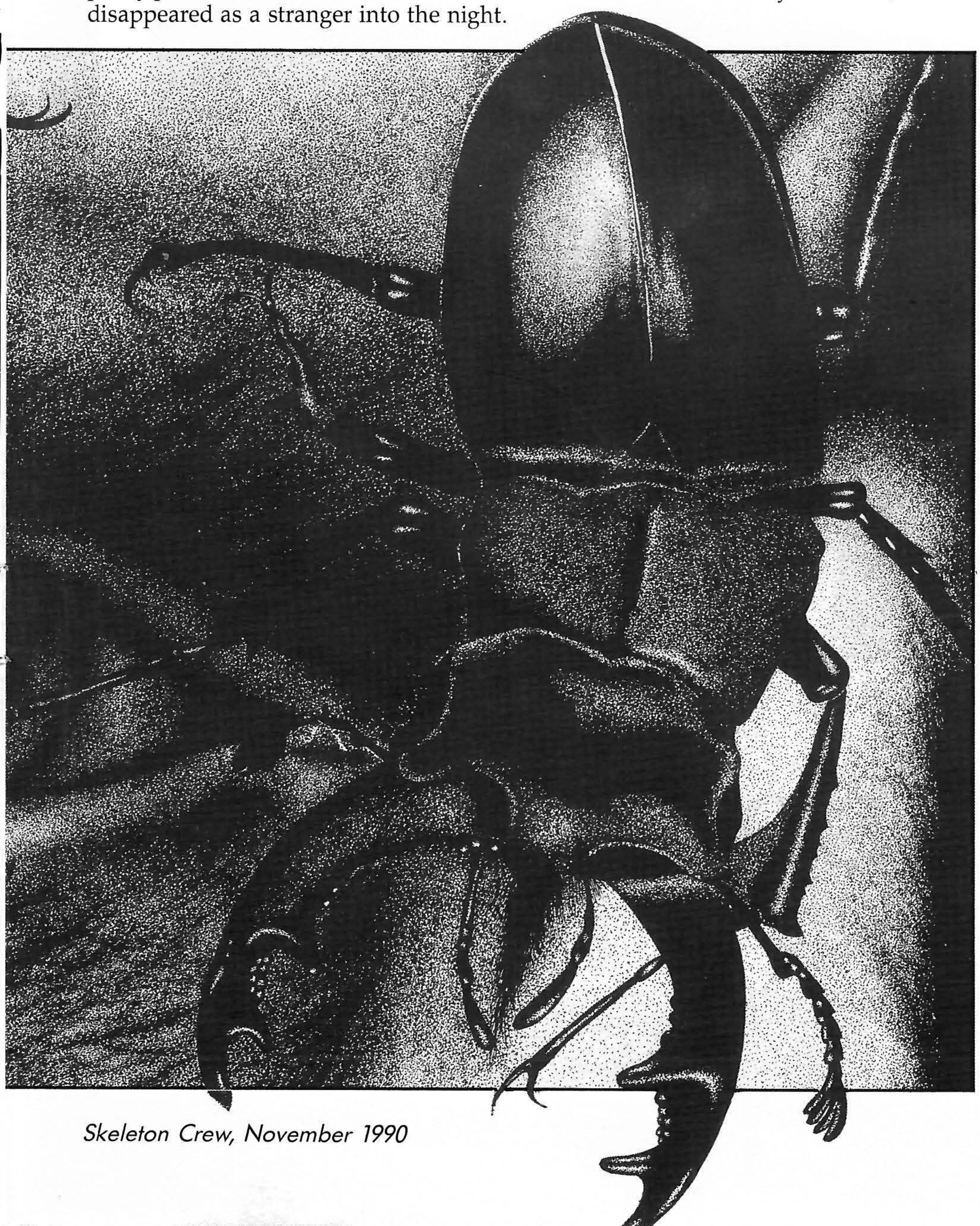
There was a crunch, then, and silence.

Desperately trying to scurry back on hands and knees to the pavement, I must have missed the most significant bit for, eventually, I saw that the carriage clock had disappeared and worms of smoke crawled along the mantelpiece.

And a girl's face gradually slid like a red sunset over the glass of the window, with all the clockwork of her head hanging out on spring of blood . . .

I shrugged and forged on quickly, since the weather was settling in. I shivered, pretty pleased that all the other windows in the street were still firmly curtained, and disappeared as a stranger into the night.

" — your eyes are always all over me! No wonder Mum has taken to her bed . . ."



To complete last issue's Pic retrospective, we offer more visions from the Night Gallery.

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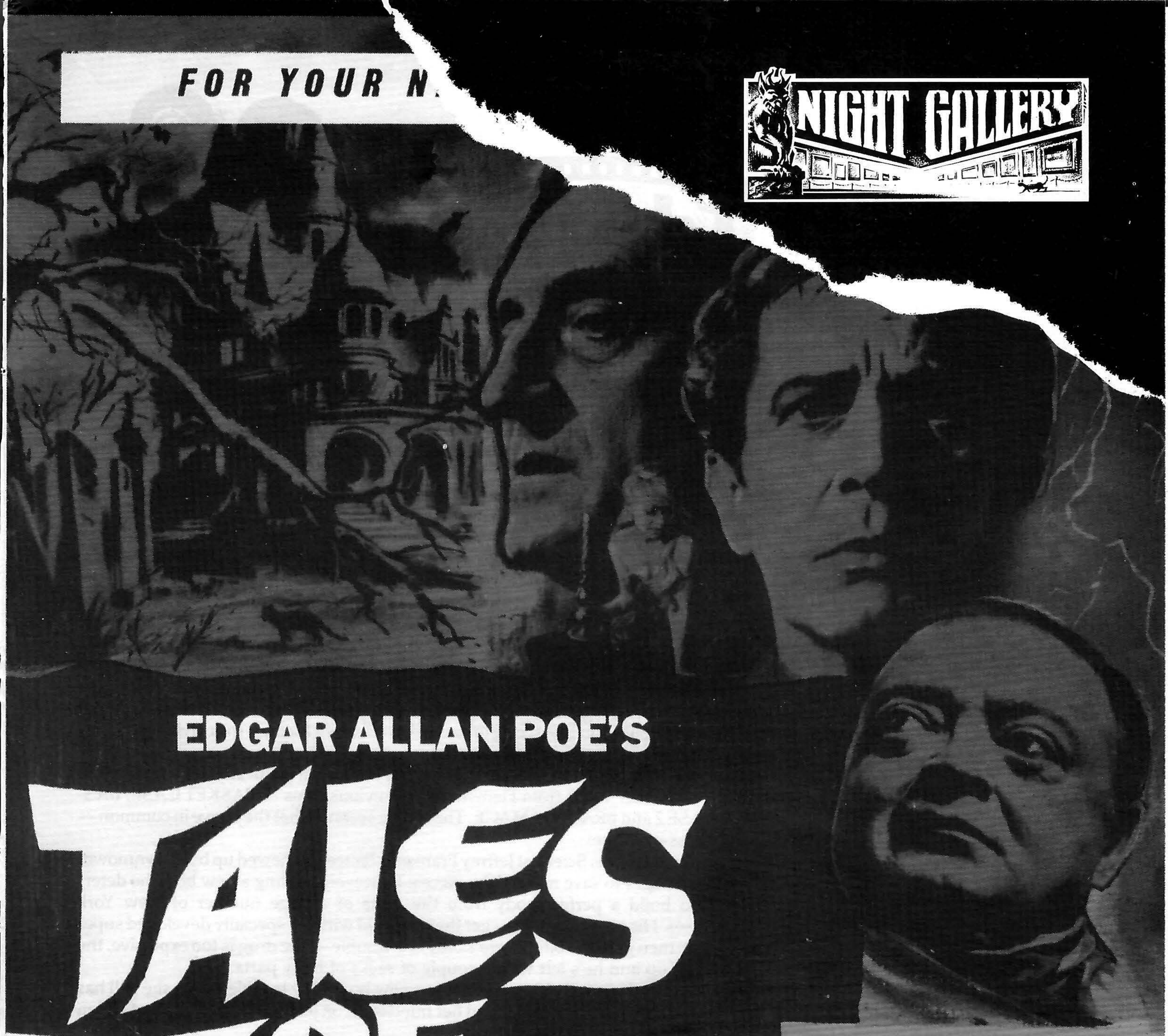

EDGAR ALLAN POE'S

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SPECIAL GUEST STAR DEBRA PAGET

Produced and Directed by ROGER CORMAN · Screenplay by RICHARD MATHESON

FROM ANGLO AMALGAMATED FOR WARNER-PATHE RELEASE

Film Crew

Dave Reeder checks out Medusa's latest gross-out and loves every minute.

It's not easy being a film reviewer. Every month you have to watch an endless stream of films, devoid of imagination, devoid of style, devoid of the spark that illuminates the great pictures.

So? Well, most magazines never really get around to admitting that, even to themselves. The endless search for the new sensation, the compulsion to try and find at least one positive (or ego-massaging smart-aleck) comment about it does tend to blur the objectivity we all seek. In short, we all play a game. Well, not here we don't. At least, not this month.

Possibly, for the first time in the history of film/genre magazines, we're not going to get all anal retentive about this month's releases. We're not going to review them just for the sake of it.

So? Instead, we 're going to look at just one film. A film so full of fun, and life, and desire to pay back cultural debts, and gross-out excessives, and all that, that it just shouts — 'Let's party!' The film? Frank Henenlotter's FRANKENHOOKER.

In fact, it's such fun that we've talked video releasers Medusa into giving us copies to distribute to you. Of which, more later.

On to the film. Where to begin? This is really unlike just about any other horror film you've ever seen, apart from Henenlotter's previous films — BASKET CASE, BASKET CASE 2 and BRAIN DAMAGE. Think for a second what they have in common — yup, gross-out time!

The plot is simple. Scientist Jeffrey Franken's fiancee is chewed up by a lawnmower but he manages to save most of the pieces. However, needing a new body he determines to build a perfect body from the parts of a large number of New York prostitutes. His plan is simple — get them relaxed with his specially developed super crack and then grab the bits. There's only one trouble — the drug is too explosive, the girls blow up and he's left with a couple of sacks of body parts.

That's okay. He's still able to assemble a new body. The trouble is that she still has the sensibility of each body part and her mind is set on just one thing — a bit of action for cash. And so on.

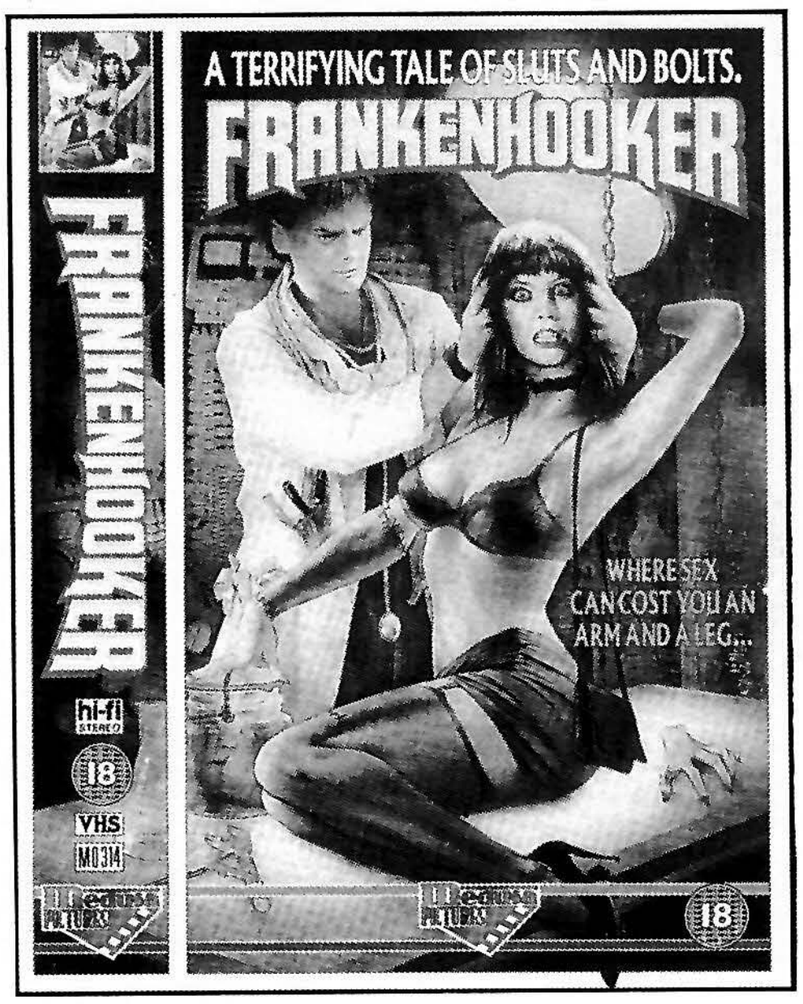
So what's so special? Well, the two main characters (James Lorinz and ex-Penthouse Pet Patty Mullen) pull back the over the top comedy successfully, imparting pathos and sensitivity to their parts. Equally, despite excellent SPFX from Gabe Bartelos, the gross-out elements are always — strange as it sounds — integral to the plot. It's hard, however, to give you too much flavour of the dialogue without spoiling the charm of hearing it fresh; and that's the essential charm of the film, I guess — the freshness with which the hackneyed Frankenstein theme is reworked. And it's set up for a sequel too.

But don't take our word for it — you could grab yourself one of ten free copies of the video. Just answer the following questions on a postcard, send to the editorial office by the end of October 1990 —

1. Name another horror film in which a prostitute is central to the drama?
2. Everybody calls him Frankenstein, but what did Mary Shelley actually call Frankenstein's monster in her original novel?
3. Can you name another funny Frankenstein film? And who played the leading lady?

Of course, if you're an employee of Argus or Medusa then you can't enter the competition. But you probably wouldn't want to, anyway.

Next month? Normal service to be resumed. Probably.



APOCALYPTIC THINKING

Known for his trenchant opinions, Alan Moore's career from WARRIOR (with *Marvelman* and *V for Vendetta*) through SWAMP THING to the future has been a circus of constant praise and deeply honest writing. Dr Christian Lehmann wanders the byways of Moore's imagination

SC: Is there any one factor to which you attribute your success since WATCHMEN?

AM: If you'd asked me when I began WATCHMEN whether all this would have happened, I would've told you not to be so silly. But now I've had some time to think about it, I'm not so surprised. For every action there is an opposite action. There is a dynamic in society. Just as there is this Right Wing crackdown, there is an equally big reaction against it; even if it's only in people's heads; even if it's only people thinking, 'I don't like this way of living. There is something wrong with it.' Most people can't think it through — perhaps because the conclusions they would reach would be unpleasant ones. For instance, most people don't want to think about the environment, because if you think about it . . .

SC: . . . you have to change your life.

AM: Exactly. You have to, at least, put some real effort into working with environmental organisations and trying to do something about it. It's not comfortable. Most people would rather let somebody else do it. I mean, in forty years the rain forests will be gone. If the rain forests are gone, we can't breathe. Simple as that. There's nothing that's more simple than that: no trees, no air. One of my children is eight. She said to me the other day, 'I'll only be forty-eight, won't I?' and I said, 'Yeah', It's a pretty depressing thought. What a horrible thing to have to think about. I mean, we brought these children into the world and it might not have that much longer left. Nuclear reactors, for another thing. They can't be decommissioned because nobody knows how to do it. But they keep building them. We are going to have a Chernobyl every four or five years from now on. And more, because those reactors weren't built to last for twenty-five years in the first place; and they were built thirty years ago. One of those reactors is going to go up every few years. No-one likes to think about that. When the radiation's falling down from the sky, as long as they can't see it or taste it or smell it they'll pretend it's not there, because otherwise they'd have to do something about it. It's the same with the nuclear weapons industry. It's too big; too big and frightening for people.

"I mean, in forty years the rain forests will be gone. If the rain forests are gone, we can't breathe. Simple as that. There's nothing that's more simple than that: no trees, no air."

SC: In WATCHMEN, there's only one person who takes into account all these conflicting, extremely difficult-to-sleep-with ideas and does something about them. What do you think about them. What do you think about him?

AM: Veidt? Well, he's the other side of the coin from Rorschach, a right winger who has the most integrity in some ways; Veidt is a liberal and, in some ways, is the biggest monster. This was again perhaps trying to counter-balance my own natural prejudices — it would have been to easy to make Rorschach the villain and have this blond liberal superhero save the day. I was trying to use Veidt as an analogy for arrogant people with good intentions. There are lots of levels of analogy in WATCHMEN, but one of the levels that relate to Adrian Veidt is that we clue the reader in on the very first page, where Rorschach mentions President Truman and later on in Chapter Four where we have a lot of talk about Hiroshima and also in the text feature at the end of the Rorschach issue, where Rorschach says that he thinks Truman was right to drop the bomb on Hiroshima because more people would have died if he hadn't. Veidt's argument is an old argument, you can see. That it is all right to commit an atrocity if the end justifies the means. The only difference with Adrian Veidt is that he didn't do it in some far-off country full of yellow people; he did it in the middle of New York. That's why Americans were so shocked by the ending, because it's unthinkable. All right, maybe some people do have to die to make the world safe, but not Ameri-

Skeleton Crew, November 1990

"I've heard assholes like Robert Heinlein say that, in some ways, the bomb would be a good idea because it would make people tough again, that it would be a return to the pioneering spirit of the Old West. Well, the Old West wasn't radioactive. You could grow things in the Old West. And this is a Science Fiction writer who should, frankly, know better."

cans! That's too great a price. Yellow people, yeah; black people, sure; brown people, okay; WEuropeans if we must. But not Americans; Americans' blood is worth too much. Wog blood is comparatively worthless. Hundreds of wogs can get killed and it doesn't add up to one drop of American blood. If one American tourist gets killed, they firebomb Tripoli. It's that way of thinking. So by using Adrian Veidt as, you know, almost a model Caesar. An industrial Caesar rather than a military one, but a modern Caesar nonetheless and, like all Caesars he thinks he knows what's best for the world. And if you look at his motives, he's got a point, his argument is logical; he's a credible character. But the key to his personality is his arrogance, his egotism — the belief that he is right; that his is the only solution.

SC: He says to Dr Manhattan, 'That was the only way.'

AM: That was the only doubt in the entire story. When he says, 'I did the right thing, didn't I?' That's the only moment where, just for a second, you see something in his eyes where he's thinking, Christ what have I done? That's his only human moment. All of the characters towards the end have their own human moment. Rorschach's is when he starts crying. The Comedian, when he starts crying, and when he says, 'I don't get the joke. I don't understand it. It's not funny any more.' And when, for a moment, the enormity of what Veidt has done suddenly comes home to him. Veidt has his doubts. And of course, at the end of the story, it's all left in doubt. Maybe it was all a massive sacrifice for nothing.

SC: As a writer you give your various characters beliefs and motives even if you don't share them yourself. But, in WATCHMEN, the Rorscharch character, who is far more right wing in his beliefs than Margaret Thatcher, has a certain dignity, courage and even heroism. Why did you do that?

AM: It is something that probably started with V FOR VENDETTA, where you have an ultra-right-wing fascist state in the future, one very romantic character against them. The obvious way to portray fascists is as cartoon Nazis with monocles, Heidelberg University duelling scars, show them torturing lots of children and so on, so that everyone is sure that they are the bad guys. Now that seems wrong to me. The Nazis didn't come from Mars, they weren't monsters such as the world had never seen; they were street sweepers and factory hands and bakers and butchers. But when someone in uniform told them to, they went out and killed six million human beings. And the same would have happened in England and France and any nation in the world, if the historical circumstances had come together and produced a charismatic enough leader and a credible enough threat.

SC: And a bad economy.

AM: Right. The same mechanisms are used over and over again. When England had a bad economy, we allowed the Falklands War to happen to take our minds off it. Iran has got a bad economy; the Iranian revolution is going down the toilet. So Salman Rushdie is the threat from outside. These people are not terribly imaginative; they only know one trick and they've been doing it for centuries and been getting away with it. They're worried now because the rules are starting to change now. It's not so easy to keep things secret any more, or to keep them under control. There are too many vectors; it's all getting a bit too chaotic; there are too many unpredictable elements entering the thing. Now, with V FOR VENDETTA what I tried to do was make the fascists real human beings. Some of them are unlikeable, some are likeable; they are all credible. In one issue of V we put side-by-side V's argument for anarchy and one of the lead fascist's arguments for fascism. V's is the more attractive and romantic; the fascist argument makes the most sense, at least on the surface. I wanted people to really think about this. I didn't want to give one person a black hat and one person a white hat. It's obvious where my prejudices lie, but I wouldn't be a very good writer if everything in my writing reflected my prejudice. I'm very much against the baby bird school of moralising, where you have all of your audience with their beaks open and you feed them predigested morals, and they chew them up without any sort of discernment whatsoever. What I would rather do is give people moral problems, Yes, Rorscharch is loathsome, but he has integrity. He is obviously psychotic, but in some ways his worldview is very difficult to argue against. It's not the only worldview that we present in WATCHMEN but it's credible, believable. It's this thing of trying to stop people thinking in terms of heroes and villains, because I think those are dangerous concepts. Like I say, the Nazis weren't villains but ordinary human beings who did terrible things. Heroes are usually people who, if you happened to be on the opposite side of any battle, would be famous monsters. It is all totally subjective. There aren't any pure heroes; there aren't any pure villains; there's just people. But people like

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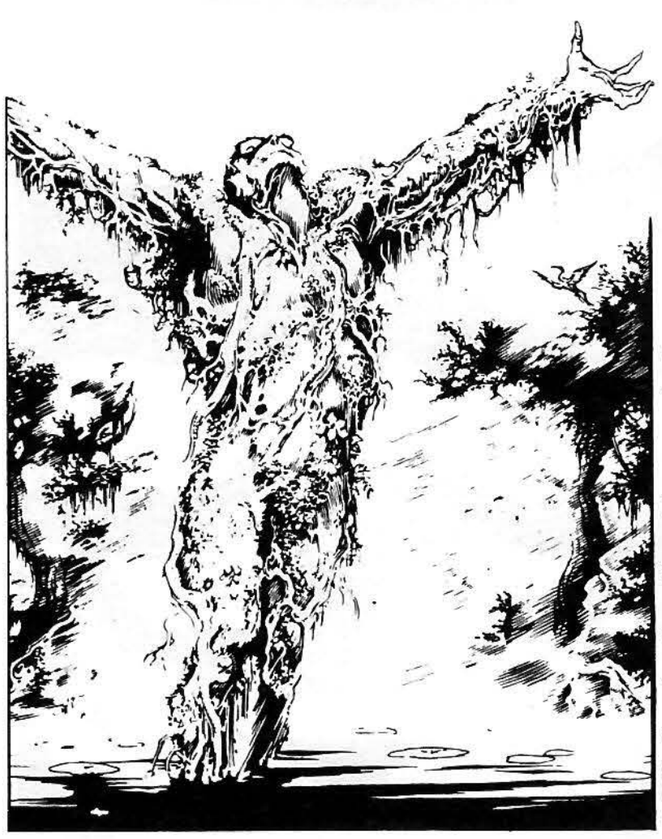

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there to be heroes and villains, because if we can say, 'That person is a monster', it makes us feel better, or not so bad. Or it makes it not our responsibility. Mrs Thatcher isn't a monster. She's just a fairly nondescript intellect, but she's a greedy and an ambitious woman. It's too bad that she's Prime Minister. I mean, if she'd have stayed in her greengrocery business, probably not many people would have shopped there an awful lot, but it wouldn't have done any great harm. But a lot of the left wing Britain like to portray Mrs Thatcher as a monster.

SC: Do you think that there's another way of thinking to Comrade Veidt's, then?

AM: Yes. One thing I'm very concerned with at the moment — partly because its a phenomenon that I must take some of the blame for — is 'apocalyptic thinking'. We live in an age where there are two basic attitudes concerning the future. Some people think that the future will be exactly the same as today, but with smaller radios and bigger cars. The other people think that there isn't going to be a future, just a mushroom cloud. So, in either instance, on one hand, if the future's the same as today, why prepare for it? And on the other, if there's no future, why prepare for one? There is nobody trying to imagine a future whereby we might be able to survive physically and psychologically and, yes, apocalyptic fiction is in some ways part of the problem. When I was writing that stuff I was trying to alert people to the danger; that we might have an apocalypse, so let's stop it before it's too late. But although that seemed to me the best thing to do at that time, I think now we have to go beyond that, because everybody — at least, in their guts — is aware that we might have an apocalypse. They all fear it, are paralysed by it; they will not imagine a future and so they'll come up with apocalyptic films that are optimistic: MAD MAX says there will be a future and that human values will still be important after the bomb, even if those values are being expounded by mutants riding across the valley in their dune biggies with their masks on. There'll still be human values. But of course, after a nuclear war there wouldn't be any human values. There'd be cockroach values; there might be rat values; but no human values. It's optimistic to try and pretend that we are imagining as grim a future as possible. We're not. We're trying to comfort ourselves by saying that the spirit of independence and adventure will still exist after the bomb, that it'll be something like the pioneering days. I've heard assholes like Robert Heinlein say that, in some ways, the bomb would be a good idea because it would make people tough again, that it would be a return to the pioneering spirit of the Old West. Well, the Old West wasn't radioactive. You could grow things in the Old West. And this is a Science Fiction writer who should, frankly, know better.

What we have to do is try and imagine that if the worst *doesn't* happen and we *don't* destroy ourselves, what are we going to do? Where are the ideas? In about 1875, somebody working in the American Patent Office resigned. They said, 'What's the point? Why go on? We've invented everything." In Victorian England this was even more so. They said, "We know everything there is to know about physics: we know that there is only one energy source in the universe and that's the Sun; we know Radium can't possibly exist, because only the Sun creates energy; We know that the universe was started 800 years ago — certainly no more than that — and it's slowly winding down, so in another ten thousand years or so the Sun will go out and we'll all die." We thought we knew everything, that we'd reached the very pinnacle of civilisation. We knew that the ether existed, and that explained everything. What we'd done was excluded everything we didn't understand, so we had a very small universe which we understood perfectly.

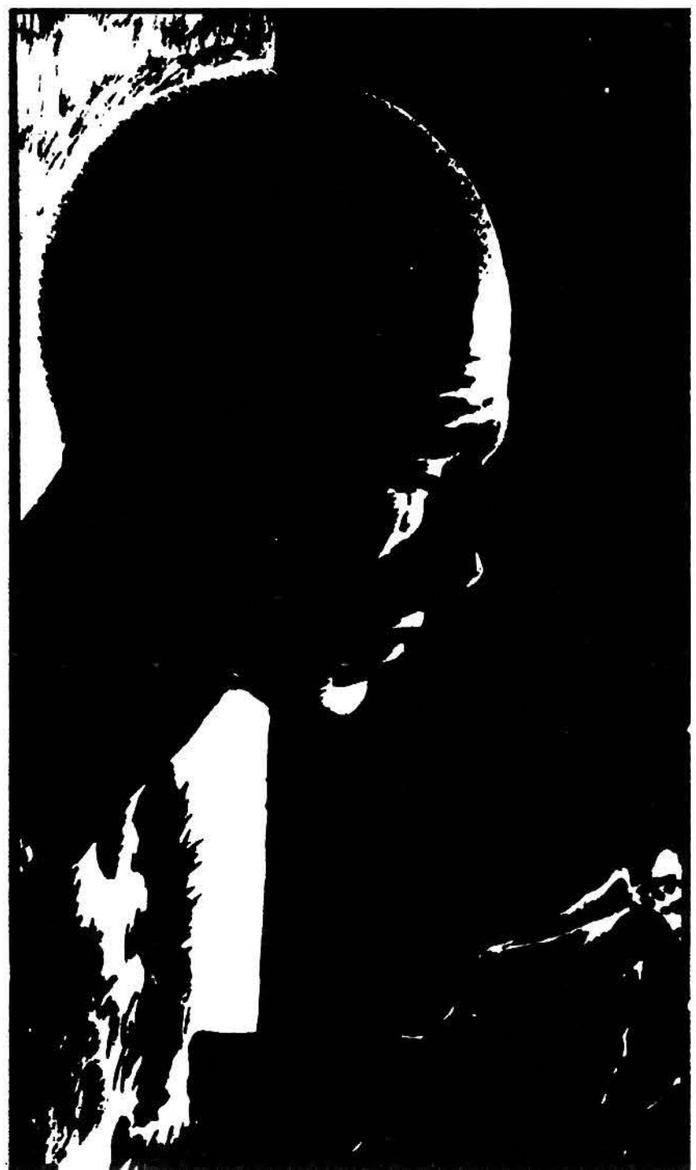
And, of course, five or six years later, someone discovered that the ether didn't exist at all, and all the scientists thought, 'We were wrong about the ether, and that means that all the things we thought were impossible are probably possible, and in fact we *don't* know what's going to happen in the future. We thought it was all going to be so predictable, with no surprises for the next million years or so, but in fact we don't really know what's going to happen *tomorrow* . . . ' And then you get the collapse of the Empire. We went into a state of psychological shock, because we realised that there *was* going to be a future after all; that it *was* going to be different. But we didn't know how to deal with it. And whereas previously we had been able to see ourselves as being at the very pinnacle of Man's evolution and that from thereon nothing could be improved, we suddenly realised that our entire worldview was wrong, and that history was just going to keep on rolling. And if we didn't roll with it, we'd get left behind. Which we did.

And I can see a lot of parallels: there's a lot of that sort of thinking going on now.

Skeleton Crew, November 1990

"I HOPE THAT YOU ESCAPE THIS PLACE.
"I HOPE THAT THE WORLD TURNS AND THAT THINGS GET BETTER, AND THAT ONE DAY PEOPLE HAVE ROSES AGAIN.

"I wanted people to really think about this. I didn't want to give one person a black hat and one person a white hat. It's obvious where my prejudices lie, but I wouldn't be a very good writer if everything in my writing reflected my prejudice."



Much horror distorts reality by relying on the concept of the outsider. Instead, argues Joel Lane, we should recognise the politics of horror itself.

Dead Write

In Harlan Ellison's short story *The Whimper of Whipped Dogs*, the murder of a young woman on the streets of a housing project is described in graphic detail: the repeated attacks, the trail of bloodstains, the protracted screaming. The viewpoint character is another young woman, watching from the window of her flat. After the victim's death, the witness looks up and sees that in every window across the street, there is a face like her own, watching.

The established traditions of the horror genre blame atrocity on the evil of social outsiders. These monstrous beings, either through their own warped natures or through possession by Satan, are driven to violate the lives of normal people. Only the virtue inherent in the authorities of church and state can thwart the forces of evil. In the last two decades, a minority of authors in the horror genre has tried to oppose these reactionary and stereotyped conventions, and to make horror fiction address the issues of present-day life in a more radical and socially critical way. Ramsey Campbell's anthology *New Terrors* (1980) was strong evidence of the shift in attitude: a turning away from genre towards greater involvement with real-life themes. Following the lead of "New Wave" science fiction, the new horror dealt with atrocity and the violation of taboos in a wider social and psychological context. Instead of attributing evil to deviant individuals, it showed how destructiveness and alienation were built into the physical and social environment of normal life.

Dennis Etchison's short story *The Late Shift* describes a seedy commercial enterprise whereby the freshly dead are *borrowed* from mortuaries, briefly revitalised and set to work on night shifts in factories and service stations. The perpetrators don't make a fortune from this enterprise, just a living. There is no humour in the story. This, in all its black absurdity, is what casual labour is like.

Ramsey Campbell's novel *The Face That Must Die* (1978) is narrated partly from the viewpoint of a psychotic killer, and partly from the viewpoints of people around him. His fears, hatreds and prejudices are echoed in the words of other characters. Indeed, he tells himself that he is only putting into action what every decent person must feel. In this novel, as elsewhere in Campbell's writing, people in general tend toward psychopathic behaviour when the stability of their lives is threatened. They look for available scapegoats — in social outsiders, or in each other. The conditions of economic scarcity and the shared inner-city environment inflict on all of them, in differing ways, a sense of insecurity and desolation. Loneliness becomes something impersonal and collective — thus, ultimately, something inhuman.

A related example of "social horror" is Roman Polanski's film *The Tenant*. The central character is a foreign (possibly Jewish) immigrant who rents an apartment in Paris. Disturbed by the hostility and suspicion of his neighbours, Trelkovsky comes to identify with the flat's previous occupant: a young woman who committed suicide. On the point of being evicted, Trelkovsky dresses as a woman and then jumps from his bedroom window. He falls through a glass roof onto the courtyard. The other tenants of the building gather round him as he crawls along the ground, badly injured. They point and stare, talking among themselves. Their sense of propriety is outraged by the foreigner's appearance and behaviour. Trelkovsky drags himself past them, up the stair and back into his apartment, where he throws himself from the window a second time. As in Ellison's story, the witnesses are its creators.

Inevitably, the main trend of the horror industry has been to reinforce traditional notions about the evil and the monstrous. Such caricatures as Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees (anyone with a European surname *must* be dangerous, obviously) embody the collective image of the "psycho" as someone not quite human, a composite of madness and demonic possession. We seem to have forgotten that the word "psychopath" denotes someone who is quite capable of behaving rationally, but in whom a concealed emotional disturbance has created abnormal destructive tendencies. Psychopathic characters often have successful careers in violent and/or discipline-oriented, hierarchical organisations. They don't wear hockey masks, but they may well wear uniforms.

The last five years have seen the emergence of a "New Horror" which overtly declares itself to be opposed to traditional prejudices, and dedicated to the breaking

of taboos. The New Horror, apparently, is unconcerned with such archaic matters as ghosts, voodoo or telepathic children — in other words, with the apparatus of genre. It concerns itself directly with the most uncomfortable aspects of present-day reality: mass murder, cannibalism, necrophilia, infanticide and the feasting dead.

What is this, if not a major regression to genre? Not the old genre, perhaps, but the distinctive territory of the "splatter" movies. This is an approach to atrocity which indeed refuses to stigmatise the aggressor. Aggression is built into the environment — in fact, it is built into the structure of the story or film. The victim too is displaced — he or she is simply a temporary veil between the camera lens and some internal organs. To be serious about it, what characterises the New Horror first and foremost is a visual hunger. The overwhelming structural requirement of the story is the progressive intensification of visual effects (or FX). This radically distorts the traditional function of character roles and horror plots. Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* is a determined evisceration of all known genre stereotypes: one by one, he hangs them up and lets them bleed to death.

"In this novel, as elsewhere in Campbell's writing, people in general tend toward psychopathic behaviour when the stability of their lives is threatened."

The two stock characters of the splatter movie, the serial killer and the zombie, are closely related. As popular stereotypes, they echo each other. The dehumanised image of the murderous "psycho" lends itself to vicarious, sadistic identification: the serial killer becomes an anti-hero, the embodiment of a rage against society. At the same time, his liberation is dependent on his capacity to torture and kill weaker individuals. He is not an anarchist, but a sadist in pursuit of absolute power. Zombies, on the other hand, are egoless, nameless, and inevitably plural. They are *ordinary* people, released by death into the jerking hands of instinct. The zombie is not an anti-hero, but an anti-everyman. Its existence amounts to the deconstruction of humanity. But only literally, which is why zombies behave like serial killers, and the glow in their eyes is not the arcane brightness of death but the reflection of the lights behind the camera. No wonder they devour what they cannot assimilate.

The dependence of the New Horror on its cinematic sources renders it less than universal. "Splatterpunk" fiction does *not* remind people of their own private fears, their environments or the destructive aspects of their own lives. It reminds them of some films they may have seen and comics they may have read. Or not, as the case may be. Reading *Book of the Dead* without having seen Romero's films is like reading the anthology *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* without having read Lovecraft. (Except that Derleth's introduction to the latter book is considerably less pretentious than Skipp and Spector's introduction to the former). The resemblance of the New Horror, in style and imagery, to adult comics might be seen as a side-effect of its resemblance to splatter movies. But it goes deeper than visual effects, or even plot structures.

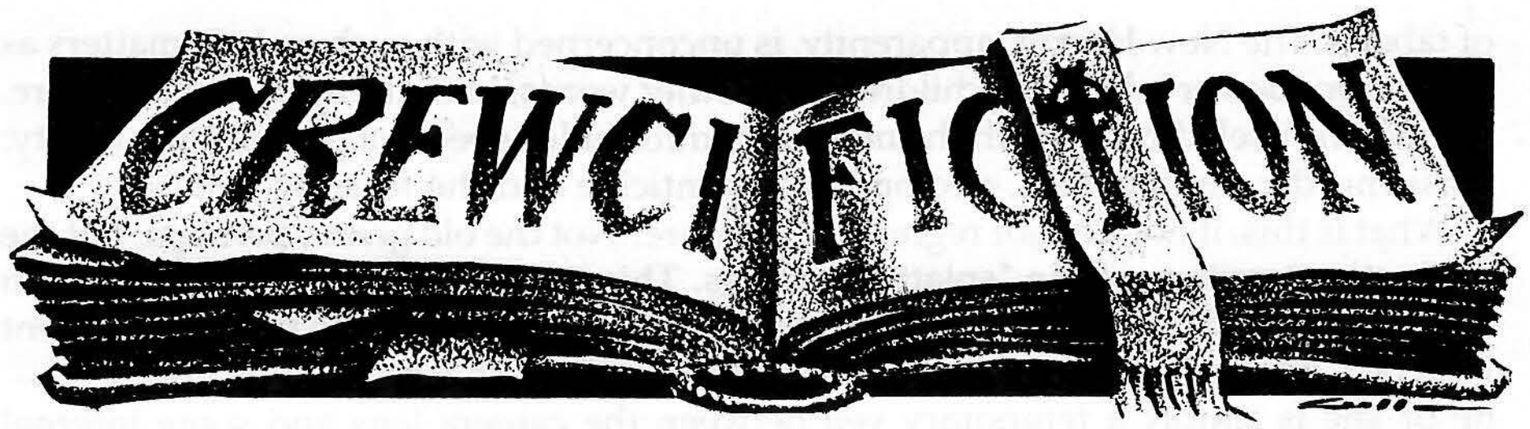
It's a question of language. The ascendancy of the "graphic novel" in popular literature is the result of a widespread feeling that comics are the ideal post-modernist literary form. In the idiom of the comics, each element is stylised, codified, detached from lived experience. Each sign is discontinuous: an emphatic word or image, a bite of meaning. There is no space for the explanation of any symbol not already in common currency. It becomes easy to evoke Good, Evil, Death, Innocence, Subversion. The juxtaposition of image and text removes from either the need to represent anything *as it is in itself*. But the horror industry is too much dependent on private things — fear, lust, rage — to employ the post-modernist idiom faithfully. It retranslates it as spurious reality: the new words become the new flesh. It then appears that we live in a reality of walking stereotypes. Our senses, our organs, our body fluids all behave according to a comic-book script. We experience Desire as opposed to wanting. We experience Fear (or even FEAR), as opposed to being afraid.

And so we become not genuine witnesses, but an intrepid audience. We can sit through anything without flinching. Like the watchers in Harlan Ellison's story. Or in another of his stories, *The Power in the City at the Edge of the World*, where Jack the Ripper is kidnapped from Victorian London and transported to a future city in which dirt and poverty and guilt are anachronisms. There, he embarks on a crusade of destruction, killing everyone he can find. At least, one victim eludes his grasp. She tells him coldly, "You no longer amuse us." Then he is alone. Struck, for the first time, by a dreadful self-realisation, he says: "My name isn't Jack." Nobody hears him. They have switched off, leaving him to scream in the empty streets: "MY NAME ISN'T JACK, AND I'VE BEEN BAD, VERY BAD, I'M AN EVIL PERSON BUT MY NAME ISN'T JACK!"

"We seem to have forgotten that the word "psychopath" denotes someone who is quite capable of behaving rationally, but in whom a concealed emotional disturbance has created abnormal destructive tendencies."

The anti-humanism of the New Horror is like the swastikas which some punk rockers wore in the mid-seventies — not because they were fascists, but because such a blatant symbol of hate seemed appropriate to an anarchistic self-image. The swastika lost its currency among punks when they realised that fascism was still active in the countries where they lived. To align themselves, even ironically, with the agents of torture and persecution was a betrayal of its victims. In the end, what counts is not mastery of the image but admission of the reality.

Death comes from the most unexpected, least obscure places. At least that's what Stuart Palmer's "Amorph" discovers.



Funny, he thought, of all the things I've done, this is the easiest. A smile spread across his broad face, bitter and cheated the way Larry'd smiled on the field. It faded quickly. He paused. For a moment he thought he was no longer alone. He glanced around the garage, eyes hooded and red-rimmed. It was a trick of the mind. It was just shadows and concrete. Shaking his head, he ran a paw through his thick black hair. Time was wasting. It had to be done soon.

In long strides he moved to the exhaust pipe and crouched beside it. It was like the barrel of a gun. Not standard issue, too big for that, but he'd seen them on the islands. His face screwed tight like a fist. His hand reached up to touch his broad chin. It was warm, rough, reminded him he was human.

"All that," he whispered hoarsely, "and I'm still human."

He pressed the hosepipe on the exhaust and stepped away. The dirt he wiped on his jeans and sweatshirt. They were old. Mum had bought them from the market when he was training. Now they were wearing thin, riddled with holes the size of bullets.

The original plan had been to wear his uniform. It was still packed. He'd looked but couldn't bring himself to touch it. Besides, he'd put on weight. The muscles were dying. Drink had bloated him, made his skin sallow, done nothing for his guilt but made it harder to remember why. Still, he remembered a soldier was supposed to die in his uniform. Larry had.

He pushed the other end of the pipe through the window and wound the window closed. Soon he'd be free of the phantoms. Opening the car door, keys in plump fingers, he smiled. It wouldn't be long now.

He stopped. There it was again. There was someone else in the garage. Now he felt sure. Somewhere in the shadows by the workbench. He turned slowly, eyes drawn from the jutting pipe to the darkness behind him.

"Mum?" he said. "Are you there?"

Mum did not reply. It would not be her style to hide behind the shadows and the oily smells. Mum would throw open the door and walk straight in; no knock, no polite cough. But the door was locked and bolted. He fingered the hosepipe, nervous. His heart was beating faster now. He imagined himself with a rifle crawling through rocks and dying grass. He imagined crawling past Larry as he lay dying.

"Who's there?" he called.

Only silence. He set his jaw firm against the shadows. He slid the keys into the pocket of his jeans. All he had to do was turn the ignition and wait. It wouldn't be long before he drifted into a deep sleep. There'd be no phantom explosions to disturb him, no Larry looming out of the sea spray, limbs bleeding and torn away just below the knee and the elbow. Yes, that was what he feared most. Larry standing in his dreams, his rifle floating in the turbulent air where his hand ought to be, his real hand laying shredded behind him by the edge of the sea.

An oil can fell to the concrete floor. It sounded huge in the garage, almost made him cry out. He span round, hands raised defensively.

"Who is it?" he called. "I know you're there. Come on out."

Still nothing answered him. Whatever it was watched, waited, dared him to step closer. He swallowed hard. He took a deep breath. Perhaps it was a cat . . . or a mouse. There were mice in the garage, Mum had said so. She'd told him over supper one day as she tried to draw him out of his silence. Her frail features and nervous eyes always watched him as they ate together. She'd tell him about her day, try to illicit some response; try to reassure herself that he was still the son she had known before . . . before the conflict. Sometimes it would get to much for her. She'd start to cry, scream at him, shake him. One day she seized his plate and threw it against the wall. As it struck and shattered and the shards and the food fell away like shrapnel, she began to shake.

"Why won't you talk to me?" she shrieked. "What have I ever done to you? All I did was love you. Duncan! Answer me for Christ's sake! Answer me!"

He looked at her with tight lips. Her hands were like claws supporting her against the sideboard. He stood up and left her there. He went to his room and tried to think about nothing . . .

Now nothing was waiting for him in the corner of the garage. He squinted into the gloom, eyes strafing the workbench, the old shelving unit that had once stood in the

"Larry had glistened when he died. He had been slippery with blood. Some was his own. Some had been sprayed from those closer to the bomb . . . But now he knew the thing under the bench wasn't Larry. It wasn't a mouse either . . ."

living room, the tins of paint, empty apple crates, boxes of tools and childhood games. The oil can lay on its side a few feet from the bench. It was dripping. Dark globules of liquid glistened in the light that filtered under the door.

"Larry?" He said the word and it made him recoil. The very sound of it frightened him. It was a stupid idea, a stupid thing to say. How could it be Larry? Larry was dead, blown apart like so many others. Larry had been shattered and made into something abstract and grotesque, stained with blood, daubed with silvers of red meat. He'd fallen on the field and tumbled backwards into the long, red grass. His eyes had stared at the sky. He'd forgotten to blink.

"Larry?" He said it again. There was panic in his voice. Mice! His mind screamed. It's mice! Nothing but mice! "Larry? Are you there?"

The silence closed in. It seemed to caress him and prickle at his neck. He lowered his voice. His lips were trembling now the way they did when he woke up screaming in the middle of the night. "It's me," he whispered. "It's Duncan. If you're there, Larry, answer me."

There was a sound of wetness sliding over dryness. He hooked two fingers over his bottom teeth, holding his jaw hard to steady it. Had he seen it? He wasn't sure. If he had it had been flat and black and oily. It had rippled under the bench. He glanced at the oil can. It had been the colour of oil. It had been wet. It had glistened.

Larry had glistened when he died. He had been slippery with blood. Some was his own. Some had been sprayed from those closer to the bomb . . . But now he knew the thing under the bench wasn't Larry. It wasn't a mouse either . . .

There was a sticky noise, like jam being stirred with a spoon. It was a thick, glutinous noise that loosened his stomach. He walked backwards, watching it all the time, one had steadying him along the length of the car. When he hit the side mirror, he started and drew in air so sharply it made him dizzy. He crouched down, one hand still on the car, the other searching the floor for the knife. It was here somewhere. He'd used it to cut the pipe to the right length. The pipe reached from the exhaust to the car window.

Then the knife was under his fingers. He tightened his grip on it and stood up. He stood up slowly and moved back along the car towards the bench.

The thing moved again. He saw the tar-like membrane of its outer skin as it convulsed. Amorphous and dark, it slid towards the shelves. Duncan weighed the knife in his hand. He could throw it, strike the thing, maybe wound it. It would have to be a low shot. It would have to almost skim the floor, but he could hit it. His body was a deadly weapon. That's what they'd taught him. Even though he knew they were wrong and his body was nothing more than a skin sack of meat and blood, that's what they'd taught him. It had been drummed into him. He'd trained to that tune and eaten it and slept with it.

The knife left his hand. The shot was good. It almost caught the edge of the bench, missed by inches and span into the darkness and into the thing that waited there. He saw the knife disappear as the thing swallowed it into its greasy surface. It rippled and began to move outwards. It was fast, pulsing, its shapeless body tinged dark green. "No!" he said. His legs almost buckled and he fell against the car. Membraneous, wicked, it surged forward. He tumbled into the car and slammed the door. His breath came fast and sharp, his jaw shaking and teeth rattling in his skull. Through the window, he saw it waiting.

"Can't get me now, bastard," he hissed at it. "Whatever you are, you can't get me now!" Almost as if it understood, the thing convulsed. It began to split into two separate pieces. Duncan's face became disfigured with revulsion. One piece sat watching. The other moved round, back towards the bench, back towards the rear of the car. It bubbled and lapped against the dry concrete. Even from the safety of the car, Duncan could hear its dampness. He began to laugh. It was giddy and hysterical. He couldn't see it now. It was behind the car. Whatever it was doing, he couldn't see it. It sounded like a huge tongue slicking a dry mouth, preparing to swallow.

Duncan dragged himself round on the seat. He didn't trust it behind the car. Perhaps it had crawled back under the bench. The other piece waited for him to step out . . . He couldn't see. The rear window of the car showed nothing but the shelving unit and the concrete wall of the garage. Then he heard it again. It sounded so close that his throat tightened and almost choked him. It sounded so wet and juicy. His mouth began to run with saliva. Where was it?

He glanced round, looked from each window until he came to the passenger window directly behind the driver. There, jutting into the car, was the hosepipe. With his eyes, he followed the dark length out of the window. It was swaying. The rubber was stretching and rippling. Panic raced through him. He stretched his arm to release the pipe. Even as he did so a glistening tip of oily membrane squeezed from the end and twisted in the air. Duncan screamed . . .

"There'd be no phantom explosions to disturb him, no Larry looming out of the sea spray, limbs bleeding and torn away just below the knee and elbow. Yes, that was what he feared most."

"He saw the blade glimmer. He saw the knife disappear as the thing swallowed it into its greasy surface. It rippled and began to move outwards. It was fast, pulsing, its shapeless body tinged dark green."

Ever wondered what all this fantasy gaming is about? Ever been tempted but then changed your mind because nobody ever explains it all from the beginning? Let Liz Holliday be your guide.

It seemed so easy in the shop. After all, you'd heard all about how creative role playing games are, how they can help you set loose your imagination. Maybe you're a *Star Wars* fan, or a secret Trekkie, or maybe you're addicted to Lovecraft's fulgent, preternaturally seductive eldritch prose. And so you could not resist the game dedicated to your obsession. Or possibly, you'd heard how only the most intelligent people are attracted to playing them, so *of course* you knew it would make an ideal hobby.

Either way, you've just spent fifteen quid on a game, and your friends are coming around on Friday to play it. Now all you have to do is learn the rules. All of them. Rules for character generation, rules for combat, rules for using skills . . .

At first it seems as though you need a brain like Mr Spock's to keep track of them all. Every term has its own abbreviation and the further in you get the more there are. To really upset you, they even change meanings depending on the game. For instance, a DM in *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* is a Dungeon Master, or referee; that game is so widely played that a lot of players call the referee of any game a DM. But, in *Traveller*, a DM is a dice modifier . . . Worse, everything seems to depend on everything else, so until you understand all of it, you can't understand anything. And God help anyone who tries to skip a bit! On top of that, there's this mysterious "role playing", which many sound as if you need to be Lawrence Olivier.

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Perhaps the easiest way to get it to make sense is to imagine a game in action. As the referee, you have to describe what the players can see and hear. You shouldn't give any clues as to what the players can or can't do — that's up to them. Neither should you give information about the players' *characters* (PCs, from here on in. Watch out — there's an abbreviation about!) wouldn't have. For instance, if they have never left their own village and they come across a seven foot tall, green-skinned humanoid; then tell them that, not "the ogre turns to look at you".

The players are at liberty to ask difficult questions — "What's the door made of?" "Is the robed figure carrying anything?" "How far away is the light?" It's up to you to tell them. If you don't know the answer, make it up! The players tell you what they want to do; you have to decide whether they can do it and what the results are.

This is fine in theory, but what about the rules? The main thing to remember is that they are there to help you. To be a good referee you need to be spontaneous, but you also need to be fair and consistent. The rules provide a framework to help you.

However, different games have different objectives. Some are more realistic, but harder to run, so they are better for more experienced gamers. Others are basically quite simple, but have a lot of difference systems for doing things and so take practice to run. AD&D, the most popular game of all, is like this. A lot of gamers develop house rules or simply don't use games they don't like: this just goes to prove the old saying — "When in doubt, throw the rule out".

On the other hand, there are a couple of games which are especially good for beginners. I'd suggest *Call of Cthulhu* if you like horror, or *Star Wars* if you prefer science fiction. (Fantasy is harder. *Basic* — not *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons* is probably the best bet).

Going back to *Cthulhu*, the best thing about it is that nearly everything you need to know about the rules is compressed onto the character sheets. If you can get the hang of filling them in right, you're half way there. The players have a list of skills each of which has a percentage chance of success. If they want to try something (eg. sneaking up on a bad guy) they roll two ten-sided dice. One is specified as the tens, the other the units. If they roll lower than their percentage chance, they have succeeded. In some cases there might be a possibility that the other person has avoided them or resisted them, but all it takes to figure it out is a glance at a simple chart. It's dead easy. Promise.

If *Cthulhu* has a drawback, it's that designing adventures can be time consuming. To get the proper period flavour, you really need to actually write the newspaper articles, book extracts and so on that will lead the players through the mystery. It also takes quite a lot of skill to put in just enough hints to get things rolling, without actually giving the game away immediately.

In this respect, *Cthulhu* is a bit different from other games, where a novice referee can quite easily write a simple dungeon for her players to crash around in. For this reason, I'd recommend that you begin with the sample adventure included in the game and them progress to one of the other commercially available scenarios. Once you've had a chance to see how things are put together, you should have the confidence to design your own.

So, you've got the players. You've read the rules and the scenario. What else do you need to do?

There are some simple physical things that will make life a lot easier. Several sets of dice are useful and will speed things up — eventually people end up with their own and with pet rituals to bring luck too. Giving everyone a pencil, rubber and some scrap paper helps: it's hard to write a secret note to the ref if you have to beg paper off your neighbour first.

You can also buy goodies to make things more atmospheric. Lots of manufacturers make white metal models in 25mm scale. You can get them to represent PCs as well as monsters and non-player characters (the people your players meet on their journey). Warning! Collecting these is addictive and may damage your wallet. They also need painting to look their most effective. It is possible to make some stunning effects, but again you need time and patience. There have been some good articles written on this subject — but not by me. I'm lousy at it and, like many players, have over 300 figures of which only 25 or so of which are painted. To go with these, you can get various kinds of gridded mats and cardboard room settings.

"To get the proper period flavour, you really need to actually write the newspaper articles, book extracts and so on that will lead the players through the mystery."

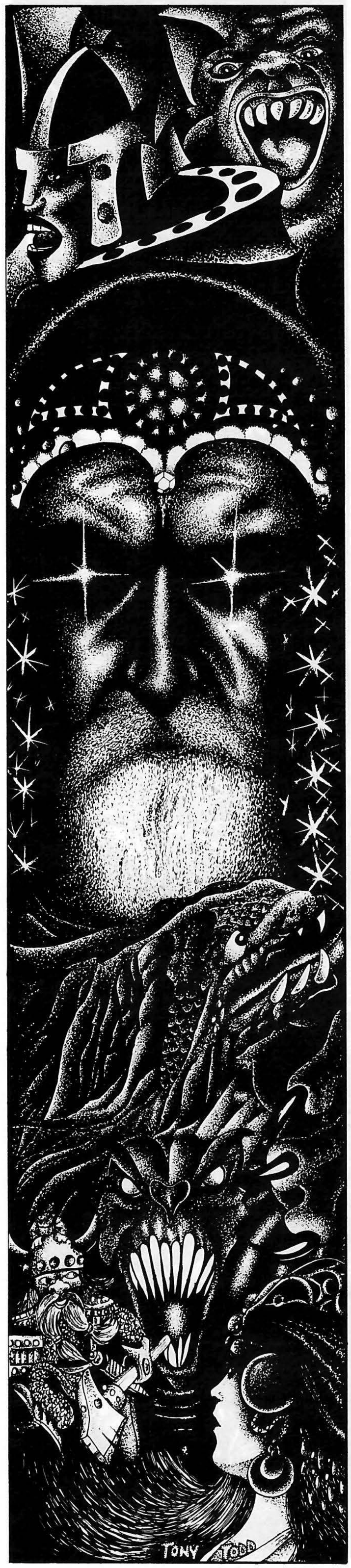
These have another purpose apart from atmosphere. In games where combat is important (which it generally isn't in *Cthulhu*) they help you keep track of who is where. This stops a lot of arguments, especially if events take a lethal turn. Apart from these, anything you can think of to set the mood — pictures of places, music, sound effects — is a good idea. *Cthulhu* by candlelight is a personal favourite!

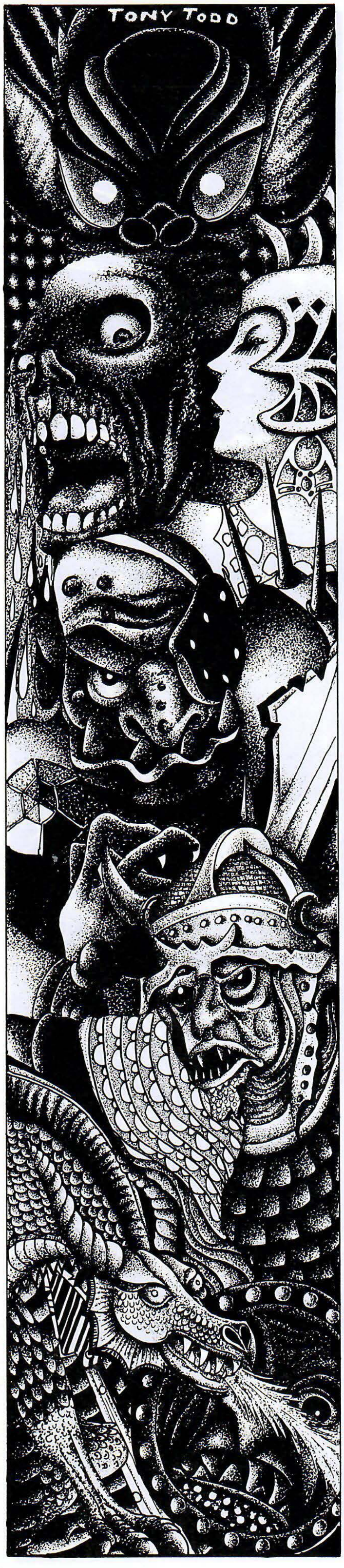
All of this will fail if you do not referee well. Try to ensure that you know the scenario. Don't be afraid to go over the top with the acting, so that each of your NPCs is different from the last. Role playing has more to do with ham than Olivier. Use the silly accents, the corny stereotypes. Better that than to be dull.

There are three situations where you most are likely to get stuck. The first happens when the players do something you or the scenario designers didn't expect. If so, be creative. Make something up as you go along. If you start making up new characters or places, best to jot notes as you go along though, just to be certain you don't forget what you did.

Second, the players get stuck. Either they haven't a clue what to do next, or somehow the game has run out of energy. If the former, don't be afraid to hint — though for best effect, work it in via an NPC, or some sort of game event. If the latter, do anything to grab their interest. This could be a "wandering monster" (the term is from AD&D) — in *Cthulhu* maybe it's an old drunk demanding money, or a bank robbery. It doesn't need to be particularly relevant to the ultimate aim of the scenario, but beware of letting the players think you're handing out clues when you're not, or they'll go haring off in the wrong direction.

The third problem happens when you can't find a rule to cover a particular situation. If you can't find one quickly, you risk boredom setting in. Either adapt a rule you know ("Well, I guess throwing a pitchfork is pretty much like using a spear.") or make





up something that seems reasonable. Like I said, the main thing is to be fair and consistent.

If all else fails, remind the players of the only universal rule: For the duration of the game, the referee is God! Happy gaming!

"Role playing has more to do with ham than Olivier. Use the silly accents, the corny stereotypes. Better that than to be dull."

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Another issue is laid down to rest. But, before we go, we give you the chance to win some horror goodies.

A combination of over-exuberance at the recent Fantasycon in Birmingham and appraisal of material that has been sent in to SKELETON CREW prompts these few lines.

In short, what's going to appear in future issues?

That we can answer in two ways. Firstly, what are we doing about generating material; secondly, how are you to influence what happens.

The first we've got covered — trust us. The way I see it is this — we'll have material or interviews with all the major players in the field as the backbone of SKELETON CREW. Sorry? Okay, I'll tell you — look for work by Karl Edward Wagner, Joe Lansdale, Ramsey Campbell, Kim Newman, Stephen(s) Gallagher and Laws, Brian Lumley, Dave Carson, Jim Pitts, Charlie Grant, Adrian Cole and so on, and so on. At the same time, we expect to forge long-lasting relationships with the apprentices of horror, the up and coming, the fresher blood — again, look for Joel Lane, DF Lewis, Jean-Daniel Breque, Nicholas Royle, John Gilbert and the rest.

Well, that's the fiction covered. On top of that, we'll look at films and gaming and comics and who knows what else. But in a slightly different way.

That's why the expected film and book reviews have been noticeable by their absence in the last couple of issues. Oh, they're easy enough to do, any magazine can throw a pile of books at somebody and get back a couple of thousand words of regurgitated gloss. We're going for something deeper. What that will be you'll have to wait to see but, trust me, it'll be different. And worthwhile.

Meanwhile, what about you guys out there? To save you asking — yes, we're looking for fiction, for artwork, for reviews, for interviews, for all sorts. There's no special word length, no favourite subject matter, no favourites. Simply send in your dreams, your nightmares, your obsessions, your half-worked ideas. What we're looking for — above all — is a personal vision; that's why there are no preformed rules. So surprise us.

Oh, don't forget those stamped addressed envelopes will you? Otherwise we might just send the Razor God to talk nicely to you. By the way, did I tell you that Joe Lansdale's on his way to these pages. Sheesh, get some rest in now.

Horror is a funny old business and we want you to prove it.

Send in your wittiest caption for this picture from *Evil Dead II* and our favourite will win themselves a goody bag from the *Skeleton Crew* book/video archives.

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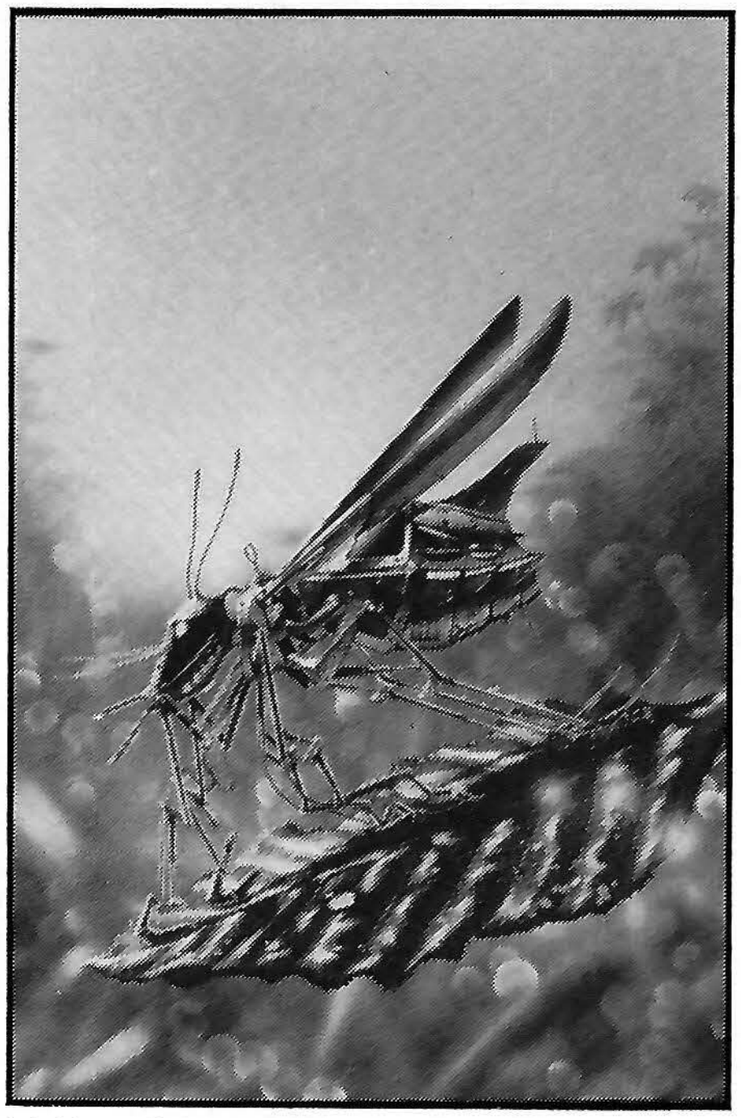

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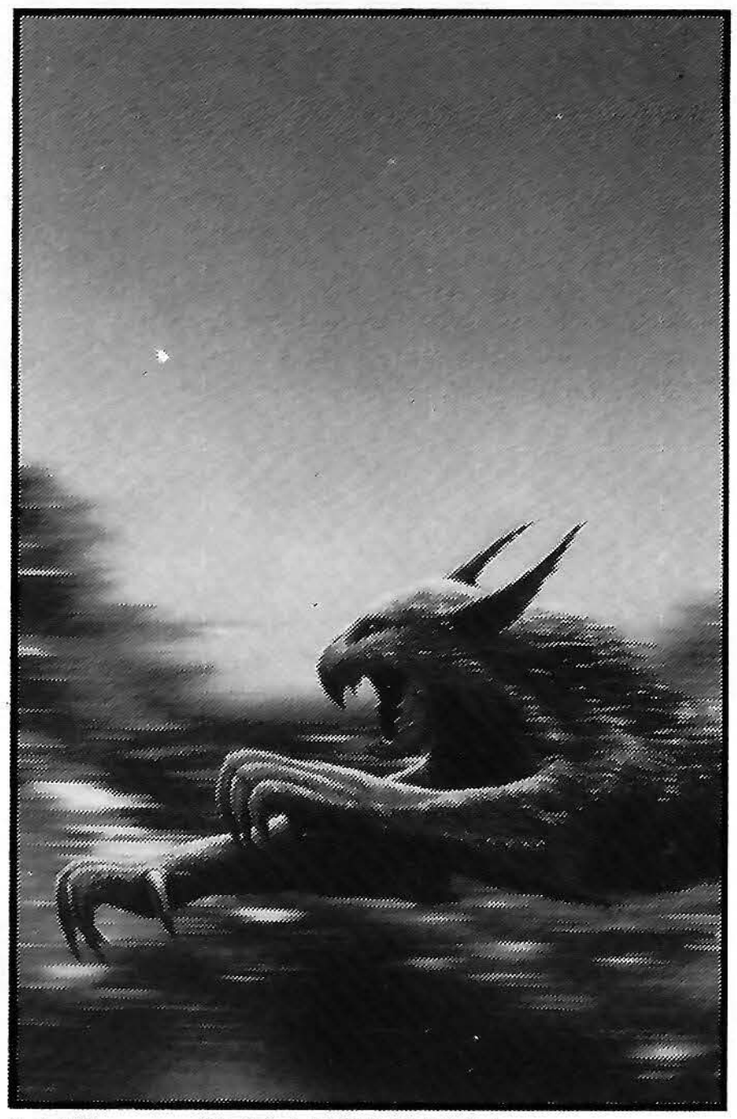

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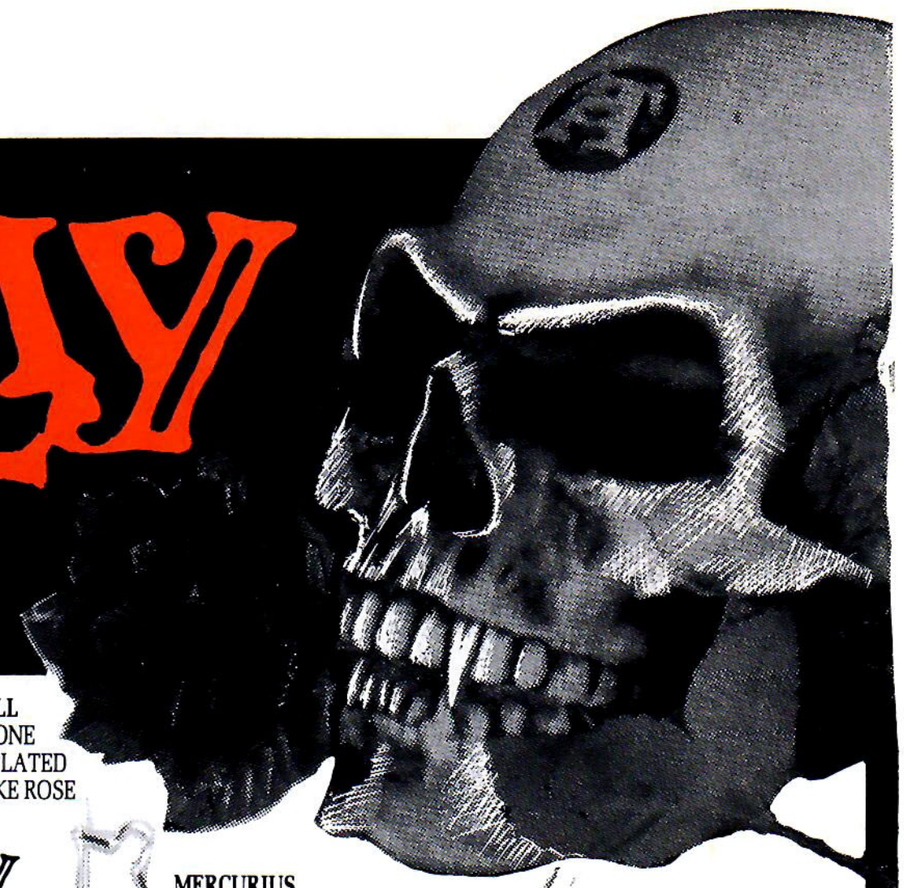

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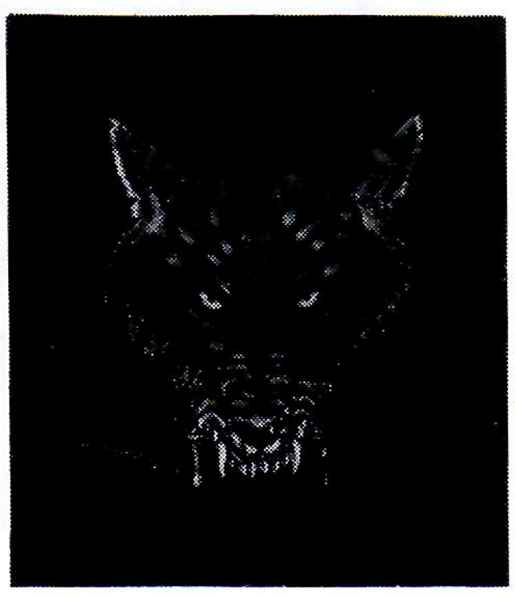

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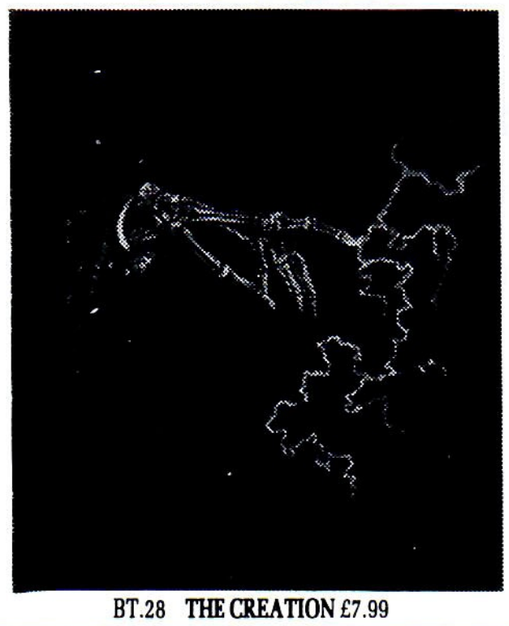

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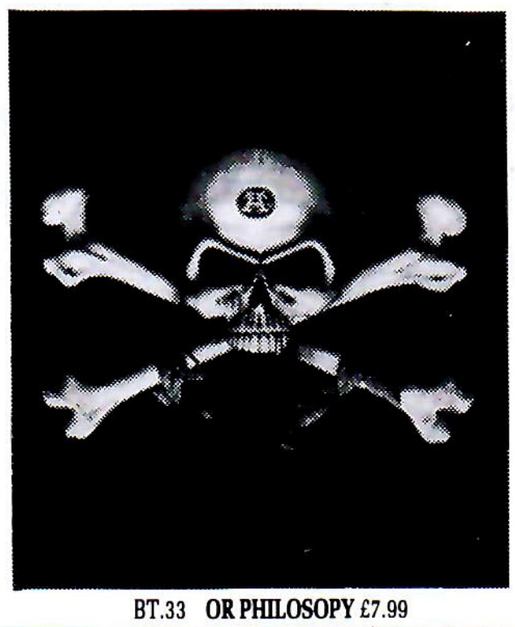

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